

# **Amanda Ackers And The Realm Of The Witches**

Book 2 of the series

**By Glenn and Sasha Gabriel**

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Novels Coming Soon:

**Amanda Ackers**  
and  
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Book 3 of this series

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There are more realms filled with creatures, than all the grains of sand in our universe.  
For each grain of sand contains many other, much smaller realms.

If a single drop of water is home to thousands of creatures, than what is the ocean home to?  
No, not the huge creatures of the sea, but the microscopic? Far too many creatures to count.

We once thought that the atom was the smallest thing there could be, and now, we have split the  
atom, and found far stranger objects.

If we could peer farther into the many things in our own universe,  
what other realms would we find?  
And, further still, within all the other universes and all their microscopic realms?

***The journey into other realms continues!***

## **IMPORTANT!**

**For the proper way to read this book,  
and to understand why the punctuation and  
sentence structure is so different than what you may be used to,  
please see Appendix “A”  
PRIOR to reading these books.**

**Do NOT Read This Book  
Before You Read:  
[Appendix A](#)**

## Table Of Contents

[Important Notice: Please Read First](#)  
[Prologue](#)  
[The Other Side](#)  
[The Face](#)  
[The Bone Pit](#)  
[To The Rescue](#)  
[Arcoma Village](#)  
[Captured](#)  
[Rayolin and Anastasia](#)  
[Learning About Witch Mountain](#)  
[Beneath The Tree](#)  
[One Wild Ride](#)  
[At The Pond](#)  
[The Glass Puzzle](#)  
[Into Witch Mountain](#)  
[Journey To Darkwoods Village](#)  
[Exploring The Village](#)  
[Shadow Alley](#)  
[Finding Bellinora](#)  
[The Face In The Vapor](#)  
[The Test](#)  
[Amanda's Story](#)  
[Amanda Continues](#)  
[The Artifact](#)  
[Cassandra's Mistake](#)  
[The Spectroscope](#)  
[The Pentagon Puzzle](#)  
[The Bogey](#)  
[The Second Petal](#)  
[The Pit](#)  
[The Deep](#)  
[Back On Top](#)  
[The Glass Panels](#)  
[The Dark Forest](#)  
[Appendix A](#)

## Prologue

[To TOC](#)

We continue the adventures of Amanda Ackers and her friends, as they fled the Realm of *The Deep Forest Elves*, journeying to *The Realm of The Witches*, in search of the powerful witch, Bellinora.

Amanda and her friends need to find Bellinora, to see if she can help Amanda get the necklace off, or give her more information about the necklace, and possibly where to find information on how to remove it, if she does not know herself.

We continue with the transcript of the greatest adventures in modern Elf history - one which would shape the destiny of all living creatures, in all the realms, of all the universes.

This is not simply a story, but a transcript of the true accounts of Amanda Ackers and her companions, as she finds a long-lost and *Wizitched Artifact*, and discovers how that *Artifact* will change the balance of power for all... especially for herself.

As you may recall, the recount of the story is being told by Elorack, an ancient Elf, who compiled the events from each of the individual survivors - human, non-human and creature, using memory extraction and recording techniques created by the High Elves.

The re-telling was commissioned by Delatoran, the Master Scribe of the High Elves, and the charge given to Elorack to discover the events as they happened. Elorack traveled far and toiled unceasingly as he searched for, and copied, the memories of all beings and creatures discovered to have witnessed or had been an actual part of the adventures.

Elorack extracted the memories from each of the survivors using advanced *Wizitch* techniques. These memories were then compiled into the time line of the events as they took place.

Here are the adventures as recorded by the Master Scribe, and presented in this published form.

You will note that normally accepted, earth-bound spellings and written formats are not utilized here. What you will *experience* is the random and often broken speech commonly used and not the correct, proper sentence structure forced upon the earth scribes.

Please be sure you have read [Appendix A](#) prior to reading this transcript!

And now, let us begin.

**The time is the present.**

You are one of many people... adults and children... who have gathered around a huge campfire in an ancient forest just outside the Grand Palace, enjoying the last of a magnificent feast and anxiously awaiting the re-telling of the adventures spoken about with awe.

But you are not with people who are limited in their capabilities, as on the earth realm. You are with High Elves and so the re-telling takes on a *Wizitch* of its own.

The events will now unfold as Elorack beckons all to leave their place around the campfire, and make their way to a massive clearing with rising stands encircling it. You climb up onto the stands with the others, you and they speaking excitedly, knowing what is to come - speaking about how unbelievable your experience was last night, when you all witnessed MRT.

The **Memorymatic Real Time**, 3D holographic-like projection, is so real, you become part of the scenery and action.

Elorack walks onto the field and with a wave of his wand, the field is no longer there. You gasp again, even though you went through this just last night, as you became a part of the first adventure, *The Deep Forest Elves*.

What you see before you now is the most *realistic* 3-D hologram imaginable, your mind once again reeling to accept the fact that what you see it is not real.

Elorack, using his wand to magnify his voice so that all can hear, repeats what he said last evening. “For those who wish to join in the *experience* of the adventures and dangers as they happened, say the word, ‘*Begin*,’ when I instruct you to do so, and your *spiritual* form will lift you from the stands and take you *into* the action. You will be *part* of the memory as surely as if you were *there* when it took place, however, no one who was actually there will be aware of you. Your *mind* will experience all the effects while your *physical* body will remain quite safe, sitting where you are now.

“Everyone here will hear all that is said, in the adventurer’s own voice or those of the many creatures they encounter, as well as *see* all that was seen...every footfall, rustling of a leaf, the *babbling* of water over rocks in a stream, the *song* of birds and such.

“Those who *choose* to participate will have *all* their senses involved, as well... they will *feel* heat and cold, *rain*, snow and the *scorching* of the sun. For all practical accounts, you *will* walk among those within the story.

“For those who wish *only* to observe... say nothing. You will remain as observers only and witness the actions and hear the speech as they happen.

“A series of adventures will be experienced each night, but through MRT, memories will be displayed at advanced speeds, so that you will *live* through many months or even *years*, in what will actually be just a few hours.

Only through the use of the Memorymatic Real Time technique, could such a *long* tale be experienced within a *single* evening in the forest.

Tonight, we continue with, “*The Realm of The Witches*.”

**It is time to once again take your seat  
and join the greatest adventures  
in modern Elf history.**

Elorack raises his arms and the large crowd you are part of, quiets. With a wave of his wand, the blazing campfire winks out. Waving his wand again, the *light* of the twin moons and *all* the stars are suddenly extinguished. The darkness is, once again, complete.

Through the crushing darkness, Elorack's voice booms, "If you *choose* to participate, speak the word '*Begin*' now."

Your heart *pounding* just as hard as it had the night before, you speak the word.

Trembling with excitement, once again, out of the darkness, you *feel* those around you *vanish* as your spiritual being rises from the stands and begins racing down some kind of tunnel. You *whip* around a corner and see Amanda and the others, *distorting*, becoming a kind of opalescent *strand* of something resembling smoke.

Landing wide-eyed beside Amanda, you *gasp*, as you too, begin distorting and turning into the same opalescent smoke-like substance.

Frightened out of your mind, you watch as your body elongates, twisting and wafting in thin air. You watch in shock as the others around you are sucked up into the air, then back and into a small crack within the little alcove.

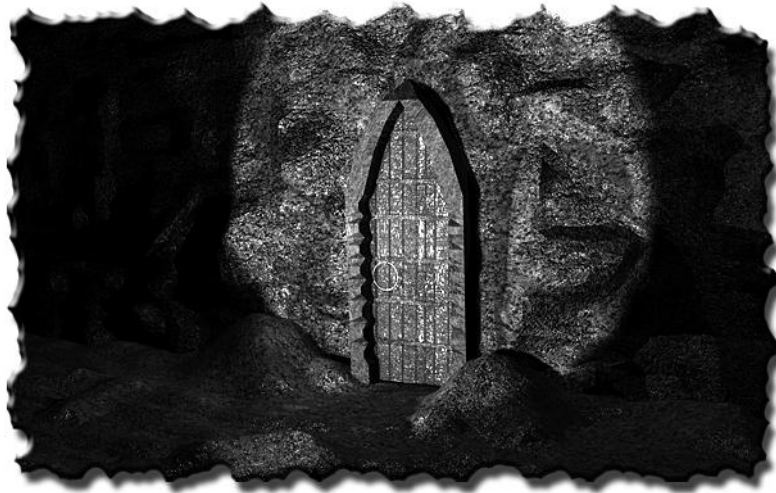
As your swirling form grows thinner, continuing to rise in the air, you twist in time to see the opalescent strands of who you know to be Amanda, rise above you and arch backward. She is rapidly *sucked* into the small dark crack, and disappears.

Your heart *thundering*, you feel yourself distort into a *very* long strand of the shimmering smoke-like substance, arch back and then *shoot* into the crack after her...

***The Adventures Continue...***

## The Other Side

[To TOC](#)



Amanda finds herself rapidly shooting through the dark cracks of the rocks within the mountain. Her mind is sharp, and she can see clearly, yet, she has no discernible body whatsoever to actually see from. Rather, she is simply strands of an opalescent smoke-like substance, giving off a soft glow while swirling, winding and snaking her way through the spaces of minuscule cracks and dark voids, in what otherwise appears to be solid rock.

“Either *I’m* getting smaller,” Amanda thinks as she watches the crack she and the others are traveling within get wider and taller, “or the *cracks* we’re in are getting larger by the second, and I know *that* can’t be right.”

Quickly, she finds that the rock walls have grown so large and so far away, she is now *completely* in the dark. The glow she is emitting no longer illuminates *anything* around her. In a moment, she sees *tiny* pin points of light quickly streaming toward her, growing larger by the second. Soon she begins passing *hundreds* of large spheres, then passing thousands of smaller ones.

New, tiny pin points of colored lights appear out of nowhere, and soon, she begins passing them in a blur by the *billions*, just like she experienced before. Amanda feels as though she is shooting through deep space, watching stars and planets shoot by at warp speed. But she knows she is not, she can’t be... can she? Her heart is *pounding* hard - she can feel it, and yet, there is no body to *hold* a pounding heart.

Realizing she can look wherever she likes, she looks down to where her body *should* be, but sees instead, very long, *glowing*, shimmering opalescent smoke-like substances, wafting, *curling*, twisting and waving below her.

She is unable to feel a thing but her pounding heart... no heat, no cold, and there is *no* sound... she only has the thoughts in her own head.

There *is* nothing else.

Slightly frightened, but having been through this type of transport once already and survived, she knows, to *some* extent, what to expect.

The sight of the colored spheres whizzing past is breathtaking. “*Breathtaking?*” Amanda thinks, turning to look in front of her, into what appears to be an inky black sky. “But, how can I *breathe* without a body? This *has* to be some kind of *really* powerful Wizitch.”

Soon, Amanda notices the spheres are getting larger and farther apart. In no time, they have *vanished* and she and the others are plunged into darkness.

In a few moments, large rough rock walls appear from the darkness and *quickly* move in on both sides. A *ragged* rock ceiling and floor soon come into view as well, and within a heartbeat, Amanda finds herself traveling once again within some kind of crack within the rock. Quickly the crack shrinks until she is zooming quickly within a much smaller crack, watching all *kinds* of creatures peer out at her or crawl on the walls, ceiling and floor, or appear from yet other cracks within the rock face.

Several creatures *swipe* at her as she passes, making her unseen heart pound wildly, hearing only her *own* screams echo in her head. Looking forward at her friends, she sees *several* of the creatures swipe at them as well. Amanda watches as one of the claws of a *huge* creature goes right through the opalescent smoke-like strands of *whoever* it is in front of her, but does not seem to affect the smoke at all. The claws simply *swipe* through it, as though it were not even there.

Staying focused in front of her, Amanda watches as her friends round a sharp curve up ahead, disappearing from view.

In no more than a few *fractions* of a second, she slows quickly as she *whips* around the corner herself, and then pops into a large glowing chamber of yellow - orange light.

Seeing her friends rapidly expanding like *giants* before her, they begin to transform back into their solid forms, their backpacks taking shape, everyone clutching *tightly* to their brooms.

A pulsating blue light is just abating, as Amanda *rapidly* morphs from opalescent smoke, toward something resembling herself.

Her hearing returns as she feels a tight compression, and begins to see her own body reforming into something solid. Her legs reappear out of a *fork* in the opalescent smoke as she looks on, *completely* transfixed by the sight.

As she is finishing her *re-materialization*, and the alcove becomes softly lit by a green glow, she hears Thian yelling, “Am I *alive*? Two *moons* over the mountain, what the *heck* just happened?”

Amanda takes several gulps of air, turns, and is met by Tia’s frightened face, as Tia *pats* her chest, then quickly runs her hands over her face, as if to make *sure* she is all there. Tianna is frantically looking around, *clearly* shaken, clutching her injured side with one hand, grasping her *racing* broom like it is a kind of *club* in her other. Loki, his eyes *wide*, looks scared half to death and very confused.

“Well... *that* wasn’t so bad, *was* it?” Amanda says brushing her hair back over her shoulder, trying to sound as though she did this sort of thing every day, while trying to calm her *own* pounding heart, thankful at feeling it right where it belongs.

“Not so *bad*?” Tianna yells through clenched teeth from the pain in her side. “*What* in all the ways of *Wizitch* just happened? Are, are we *dead*? I mean, I don’t *feel* dead. But...”

“*Hey*, I don’t feel tired at *all* now, do any of *you*?” Thian asks with excitement looking at the others.

“No,” Tia says looking a little surprised, holding her injured shoulder. “Now that you *mention* it, I feel *wide* awake. I’m not the *least* bit tired at all.”

Either are any of the others. Thian says, “The trip must have *reset* our energy or something. Too bad it didn’t *heal* us too, but I guess we *should* just be happy we’re alive.”

“What were all those little colored *balls* we passed?” Tia asks, beginning to calm down and checking Thian’s bandage. “And, uh, did you see all those weird *creatures* we passed? One almost *got* me! By the Oak and Ash, it *scared* me half to death!”

“Those spheres were other *realms* I think,” Loki says, taking slow deep breaths to calm himself. “Amanda was telling the truth. That *was* an ancient transport chamber we were in.” Running his hands over the curved walls, he continues, “This is too, by the *looks* of it. I’ve read about them in my dad’s old books. But, they were all *supposed* to have been destroyed several hundreds of *thousands* of years ago. Now, only the High Order controls the *newest* transport to other realms. And to get to a lot of those realms, you can only *go* if you’ve reached the *highest* level within your Order of Witches, Wizards, *Talpers*, Keltens, and so on.”

Loki checks Tianna’s bandage as she says, “Wait,” grimacing as she leans back against the chamber wall, then slowly slides down to the cavern floor. “You’re telling me that all those colored spheres are other... *realms*? But, there must have been *billions* upon billions of them!”

“The Journal I have says there’re other realms too.” Amanda says looking around. “I’ll tell you what it says in the journal later if you want, but first, we need to get you some help.”

“Tianna,” Tia asks, walking to her sister after hearing her yelp, “how *are* you doing? Any worse?”

“Oh no. I’m just *dandy*. Loki *tightened* my bandage, so now I can *hardly* breathe at all, thank you *very* much.” The others laugh nervously. “But really, I’m more *scared* than hurt I think. So, what do we do *now* Amanda? Where *do* we go from here?”

“Well,” Amanda says looking closely at her surroundings. “This *is* the same alcove I *left* from on earth, at least it sure *looks* like it. If it is, we need to go down that tunnel and out the wooden door. Then, we’ll be in one of the *caverns* that have the five doors to other realms. *One* of them is to the witches. Come on, I’ll show you.”

Tia helps Tianna back to her feet, wincing from her own wound, as the others gather their things and check to be sure everything is there. Thian limps over and takes Tianna’s broom, and they all head nervously down the softly glowing tunnel.

They soon come to an old ancient looking wooden door. Amanda holds up her broom arm and says, “Orathian!” They hear the *clicking* within the door as Thian, Loki, Tia and Tianna grab their wands and hold them out in front of them, at the ready.

Amanda grabs the door and swings it open. They step out into a large softly glowing chamber.

“By the Oaks and *Ash*!” Tia says slowly as she and the others look around in amazement.

“Wow!” Thian says looking at the Pentagram set in the floor, as Loki lowers his wand. “This is *incredible*! By the *moons*, you weren’t *kidding* Amanda. This is *really* awesome!”

They are smiling and looking around with wonder in their eyes, when Tianna says quietly, “I... I *guess* I owe you an apology Amanda.”

Everyone turns in shock to look at Tianna, since she hardly *ever* apologizes to anyone... for *anything*.

Tianna continues as she looks around, “I really didn’t believe *any* of what you told all of us you know... you really coming from the *earth* realm and all, and all the things you *said* you did and saw to get to our realm. The whole story was just, well, just too *hard* to believe.

“I mean, even though *Josh* and Samantha believed you right away, didn’t make it *true*. I, uh, I’m sorry.”

Amanda breaks into a wide grin, “Thanks, apology accepted. But, the thing is, I wouldn’t have believed any of *you* either, if it would have been *you* that had told me the *same* story.”

Tianna looks at Amanda for a brief moment as a thin smile appears.

Thian limps near the center of the Pentagon and says excitedly, "Hey *guys*, come take a look!"

They walk to where Thian is standing at the center, and turn to read the Dwarf writing on the long legs of the Pentagon.

Thian turns and points to each leg. "Dwarves, Centaurs, *Deep* Forest Elves, Wizards, and the last one... *Witches*! Can we take a quick look into a couple of the other chambers in that *huge* cavern you told us about Amanda? Just to see if *some* of those rooms are still standing too?"

They are all curious, and even though Tianna is in a considerable amount of pain, *she* wants to see the huge chamber with the eleven doors Amanda told them about, and go into at *least* one more of the smaller chambers that holds five doors like this one, just to look around a little.

They head off toward the larger cavern and make their way through the huge door. All eyes grow large at the gigantic cavern that holds the eleven doors, and *right* in the middle of the cavern, is a softly glowing, *spiral* stone staircase rising right up through the ceiling far overhead.

"Wow! This is unbelievable you know?" Thian says as his mouth hangs open. "There's that *stone* staircase you told us about too. By the *moons*, it's all *real* isn't it? And, you really *did* all those things you told us about, and came all this way... *alone*. Wow!"

Then the realization hits him. "We... we're really standing in another realm now, *aren't* we?"

The others are so shocked at what they find, they had momentarily forgotten that they are no longer on their realm, but some other - who knows *how* far from their own. They smile at one another nervously, excited but *frightened* at the same time.

Loki motions with his arm. "Well, each door is carved with what transport chambers you will find behind them. And all the doors have a sign over them reading, 'Chamber One,' 'Chamber Two' and so on. We just came out of 'Chamber One.'"

Amanda smiles to herself, able to read the Dwarf writing now as though it were in her native English.

"Let's take a look into Chamber Two," Tianna says headed that way. "Then, I think I'll have to rest for just a bit. But the *rest* of you can look in the others if you want."

They come to the door and read, "Pixies, Merfolk, Tree People, Fairies and Brownies."

Thian pulls himself up to his full height, lifts his arms high and says in a dramatic, *deep* and commanding voice, "Orathian!" The others laugh at his pretense and chuckling himself, he turns and sees Amanda wearing a huge grin. He had remembered how Amanda had first told them how *she* commanded the doors to open, as though she were a *mighty* wizard.

As the door finishes unlocking and begin to swing open, Thian, deciding that *he* can be just as mighty, takes a step forward with his left leg, his body *leaning* toward the door, and with arms outstretched now in front of him, begins *wiggling* his fingers, pretending that the *power* to open the door belonged to *him* alone. They others *burst* into laughter.

They walk into the smaller chamber with the five doors, and decide to quickly have a look inside each of them. Amanda warns them *not* to say the word "Transportia" out loud if they stand in the alcove itself, or they will be *off* to wherever that chamber indicates.

They look around and find each of the alcoves perfectly intact. After examining the last chamber marked Brownies, they all return to the room with the eleven doors.

Tianna sits down against the edge of the first chamber doorway, and watches the others walk to the third door. "Tell me where they *go* okay?" she calls after them.

Limping up to the third door, Thian calls out, "It goes to the *Moss People*, *Drows*... those are known as the *Dark Elves*, Amanda... the *High Elves*, *Wood Elves* and the *Great Eagles*."

They decide that they should not waste more time, and get Tianna to *The Realm of The Witches* to get her, Thian and Tia some help. But Tianna *insists* on knowing where all the other doors lead to.

Tianna watches them walk from door to door, Thian calling out what he reads.

"The fourth door says it leads to 'Trolls, Skeletons, Necromancers, Goblins and Dragons.'

"The fifth door reads 'Minotaurs, Ogres, Giants, Cyclops and Hippocerfs.'

"The sixth door reads 'Kabouter, Jinnie, Spectres, Abatwa and Azemen.'

"The seventh door reads 'Yaras, Huma, Ichthyocentaurs, Campes and Gremlins.'

"The eighth door reads 'Manticores, Nymphs, Dryads, Orcs and Black Orcs.'

"The ninth door reads 'Snotlings, Mimi, Gnomes, Canotila and Alseid.'

"The tenth door reads 'Ghosts, Knockers, Phoenix, Firebird and Harpies.'

"The final door reads 'Bogey, Banshees, Afrit, Nagas and Hsigos.'"

"I have *no* idea what most of those creatures are," Amanda says as she and the others head back to Tianna, who is struggling to get to her feet. "I'd *really* like to visit some of them though, like some of the other *Elves*, the *Dwarfs*, *Fairies* and the *Wizards*."

"Yeah, well, *maybe*," Tia says checking her bandage as they walk back to the smaller chamber with the five doors they had first arrived through. "But, it would really be *strange* you know? I mean, who *knows* what we'd actually find there now, after *thousands* and thousands of years.

"Where *we* come from, the door says it leads to *The Deep Forest Elves*. There *are* still a good many of them, and I *think* that Tianna and I are descendants of the line of Deep Forest Elves. But now, we've got *lots* of different types of *Elves* and *creatures* from many other realms too, who practice all *kinds* of *Wizitch* - *wizards*, *witches*, *gnomes*, the *great eagles*, *dragons* and hundreds of others too. It *would* be interesting of course, to see what's at those places now, but, I'm just not *sure* what we'd really find. Probably like where we come from - *lots* of other creatures from lots of other realms."

They walk back along the tunnel leading to the chamber with the five doors.

"Wait!" Thian says with a start, holding his arms out to the side to stop everyone. "Did you *hear* that?"

"Hear *what*?" Tia says, her heart thumping, looking scared as everyone stops.

"I, I thought I *heard* something moving over there, near the *doors*," Thian says tilting his head listening intently.

After a moment, "Well, I don't hear anything. Stop *scaring* us Thian!" Tianna says as she *smacks* Thian on the shoulder. Shaking her head, she then walks forward toward the doors.

After the others hesitate for a moment, they walk up quickly to join Tianna, making their way to the door marked "Witches."

"Well, I don't know *what* we'll find when we go to *The Realm of The Witches*," Amanda says looking a little frightened along with the others. "But, I *guess* that's where I've got to go if I want to get rid of this *stupid* necklace, or learn how it *works* and stuff.

"And listen, it's okay... *none* of you have to go with me. I mean, I really don't wanna go either. But, well, I just *have* to. But I don't want *any* of you to come if you really don't want to. And, well, *besides* I've been thinking..."

Amanda turns to face her friends. "What if something happens to us when we get there, uh, *if* we really get there at all?"

"What do you mean, '...*if* we really get there at all?'" Tia asks with a puzzled expression.

"I mean, *first* of all, like you said, it's been *thousands* of years since these transport chambers have been used. Maybe I was *lucky* when I used it... you *know*? I mean, there was *still* something at the other end when I got there. But what if the alcove at the other end had been *destroyed*? Or, you know, like the *whole* place had been torn down to build something else. Maybe I would have been *trapped* inside the rocks *forever* or something. Or, maybe I'd turn into that opalescent smoke stuff, travel through space... or *wherever* it was we went... and since there *isn't* any place to really go, I'd just *float* forever?"

Startled, everyone's eyes go wide and they look very frightened.

Continuing, Amanda says, "And, even if *we* get to *The Realm of The Witches*, *nobody* we know would know that we *got* there. And once there, *nobody* knows where we're going really.

"The thing is, even *Josh* and *Samantha* don't know where the transport chamber is back on your realm, and I really don't think they know where *this* transport chambers is. At least I don't *think* they do. So, if something *happens* to us, no one will ever know!"

Everyone looks at one another nervously, just blinking or biting their lips.

"So, what do we *do* about it?" *Loki* asks looking worried, thinking about his dad never knowing what ever happened to him.

"Well..." Amanda says with a sigh, looking up to the writing on the wooden door, then back to them. "I think we need *someone* to stay here and go back to tell *Josh* and *Sam* what we're doing."

Everyone protests at once, *Loki* a little less vocal.

"Hey, there's *no* way I'm staying here!" *Tianna* yells then yelps at the pain in her side. "If I go back, *Morpheus* and *Taldan's* little *gang* will *kill* me as soon as they see me. *Tia*, *Thian* and *Loki* too you know? Just like they... they killed..."

Tears flow from *Tianna's* eyes, as *Tia* tears up and streaks of glistening tears stream down both their cheeks. Soon, the others are in tears as well.

Amanda wipes her eyes. "Well, I agree... mostly," she says, licking her lips as she turns to look to *Loki*. "I agree that *I* can't go back, *that's* for sure. And I do think that *Taldan*, *Morpheus* and the others would *hunt* the rest of you too. But..." she pauses for a moment, looking at her friends closely, "but *Thian* doesn't have anyone to worry about him back on your realm, or really *miss* him you know?" Looking at *Tia* and *Tianna*, "And now, um, well..."

"Either do *we*," *Tia* says, tears still streaming from her eyes, "now that, that *mom's* gone I mean."

Everyone slowly turns to look at *Loki*, who quickly looks from face-to-face, swallows hard and slowly says in a low voice, "But I do. My *dad* and I are all we've got now. But, *I* don't wanna stay behind! I *want* to go with all of you. But..."

"But the whole time, you'd be worrying and wondering about your dad," Amanda says softly. "*Loki*, look. I *really* appreciate your wanting to come with us. But *think* about it. Your dad would be worried *sick* about you, and you him. You'd be wondering if *Taldan* or somebody else had gotten to him - *both* of you wondering if the other is okay or even *still* alive. So, this is what I was thinking... *I'll* go by myself first..."

Everyone begins yelling at once, all protesting.

“Wait! Let me *finish* okay?” Amanda yells holding up her hands to quiet the others. “If *all* of us go, and there *is* nothing at the other end, we could all be *trapped* in opalescent smoke *forever*. Or, killed... or *worse* maybe.”

That really lights up the others eyes as Amanda watches the blood drain from all their faces.

Continuing, Amanda says, “If *anyone* is going to be killed, it, well, needs to be *me*. I mean, *I’m* the one wearing this *stupid* necklace. Since they say I *can’t* be killed, well, *easily* anyway... uh, they *think*... then I’d have the *best* chance of all of us. And if I *do* get killed, that could mean the *necklace* gets destroyed along with me, maybe. So, it just makes *sense* that I go first. Look, if I get there okay, and see that there’s a way out of the chamber at the other end, I’ll come back to get *you* three.

“Then, Loki, you can return to *your* realm, get to your dad, and find Josh and Samantha and let them know what’s going on. Then, well, you and your dad can go someplace safe.

“The point is, *someone* needs to know *where* we went and that we’re all together and *safe* - to this point anyway. *You’re* the logical choice, and besides me, you’re the only other one who’s not hurt, and it’s a *really* important mission too.”

All eyes look to Loki, who has an expression of mixed feelings. He does not want to abandon his friends, but he really loves, misses and is worried about his dad.

After a few moments of intense internal struggle, Loki slowly nods as he chews on his lower lip. “Okay. Yeah, I guess that makes sense. We’ll all wait here for you Amanda, then I’ll get back to our realm and talk to my dad. I think you’re right though... I think my dad and I should contact Josh and Samantha, let them know where the chamber is, and what’s happened and that you guys got to *The Realm of The Witches* okay and all. Then, I *don’t* know. My dad and I’ll think of something to do *then*, I guess.”

Amanda hugs them all, even Tianna, allowing a short hug as she winces.

Amanda turns, holds her arms up, and says, “Orathian!” The door swings open.

“You forgot to *wiggle* your fingers,” Thian says wiggling his own. The others laugh.

Kneeling, Amanda puts her broom on the ground and takes off her backpack. Reaching into her pack, she retrieves her flashlight. “I’ll leave the rest of this stuff here. All I’ll need is my flashlight when I get there... I *hope*,” and reseals her pack.

Standing, Amanda turns and walks down the tunnel, then turns to look back at all her friends once she is inside the alcove.

Frightened, but wearing a forced smile, trying her best to look braver than she feels, she waves to them as Thian lets go of the door, which *slams* and latches. With the echo ringing in Amanda’s ears, her heart *thundering* in her chest, her mind reeling from the dangers she could face, she swallows hard, takes two steadying breaths, closes her eyes and says... “Transportia!”

The others sit on the cavern floor for a few minutes, resting on either side of the door. Thian soon mumbles something, then grunts as he gets to his feet. Standing at the door, he raises his arms and says, “Orathian!” The door swings open and the others all scoot so they can peer in. All that can be seen is an *empty* chamber and alcove.

Amanda has indeed, *vanished*.

Thian, with a worried expression, shuts the door, and the four of them sit and chat nervously for about half an hour, going over all the events leading up to their being here, and what Amanda might find if she *did* make it to *The Realm of The Witches*.

Tianna and Tia begin to cry in earnest, this being their first opportunity to mourn the death of their mom. Both Thian and Loki cry with them, doing their best to comfort them.

Suddenly, they all let out a *cry* of surprise, hearts beating *wildly*, when clicking is heard within the door. As they scramble to their feet, the door swings open to reveal a smiling Amanda.

“Well, I’m *still* alive!” Amanda says looking at all their surprised and grinning faces. By the tear streaked cheeks and red eyes, Amanda knows they had been thinking about, and grieving over, Thea.

“What *happened*?” Tia asks excitedly, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. “Did you *get* to the other side, or did you just end up getting sent back here?”

“Well, I *got* there without any problems,” Amanda says, stepping through the doorway. “But, once I got there, I followed a pretty long and winding pathway. It ended in a *huge* pitch black cavern. Looked like a *big* cave-in sealed off whatever kind of *exit* there used to be from there though.”

“Oh, *that* doesn’t sound good,” Thian says shaking his head. “Do you think we could use our *wands* to move the rocks and stuff away?”

“Yeah, I think so, after seeing what you four can *do* anyway. It’s worth a *try* for sure, if you three still want to come with me that is.”

They are *really* nervous, but all want to go, knowing what *will* be waiting for them if they went back to their own realm.

Everyone hugs Loki, other than Tianna, who shakes his hand and gives a short bow, and they say their goodbyes.

Amanda puts her flashlight into her backpack and slips it on, then grabs her broom. After everyone gathered all their things, they make their way through the door to the little alcove that will take them to *The Realm of The Witches*.

When they enter the alcove and take their positions, they look back down the long tunnel to see Loki holding the door open. With one last wave, Loki steps out and the door closes and locks behind him.

“Well,” Thian says looking really nervous. “I guess this is *it* huh?”

“Yup,” Amanda says looking just as nervous as the others, thinking about what they may find once the rubble is removed, if it *can* be removed. “Everybody ready?”

They all nod, gripping tightly to their brooms. “Okay, *well* then, here we go.” Amanda clears her throat, holds up her broom and says, “Transportia!”

The alcove begins to glow brightly. There is a *flash* and everyone begins to change form and are soon nothing more than strands of glowing, *shimmering* opalescent smoke, each looking at the others as they continue to swirl and wave in some unseen breeze.

There is *another* flash, and one after the other, all are *sucked* into a small crack in the wall of the alcove.

## The Face

[To TOC](#)



Amanda and the others are on one heart pounding ride, just like they had gone on a short time ago. Watching all kinds of colored spheres whiz past them, they all realize that each of these are *actually* other realms, with who knows *what* kinds of creatures inhabiting them.

In no time, they are headed for a green, blue and brown sphere. They soon shoot straight down at the little sphere which grows larger and larger by the second, until it is the size of a planet, then streak through, what *seems* to be, its atmosphere.

About to strike the ground, Amanda *screams*... in her mind anyway, knowing the others are doing the same.

They strike at the base of a mountain, Amanda *instantly* whipping around some rocks, then zips straight into a large crack, which quickly grows smaller. Soon, she is making her way through the cracks and voids within the rock, watching many *strange* creatures peering out at her, creatures even *stranger* than the ones she had seen before.

Amanda looks a short distance ahead of her, and watches as one of the creatures reaches out from within the darkness and takes a swipe at what *might* be Thian. Soon, the journey ends as they all pop into a glowing green alcove.

Amanda and the others quickly recompress into their normal forms, each gasping for breath as they laugh nervously and pat at their bodies, wanting to be *sure* they are indeed solid again and all there.

Thian, looking himself over nervously, runs his hands over his face asking, “Do I still *look* the same? My face feels... *different*.”

“Other than one side being *green* and the other *purple*, and a little *scaly* you mean?!” Tianna says very seriously, now putting a hand to her mouth with eyes wide.

“What?!” Thian cries, his eyes *popping* out of his head as he pats his cheeks. “They *are*? Yeah, this side *does* feel different than this one!”

The others laugh as Amanda says, “She’s just *teasing* you, Thian.”

Turning to Tianna, who is standing beside her, Amanda says in a serious but low tone, *just* loud enough for everyone to hear, “*Honestly* Tianna, that *wasn't* very nice. You know how *scared* Thian gets, for heaven’s *sake*!

“If you were going to say something at all, you could have mentioned how much *shorter* he is now, and at least *something* about his left ear being upside *down*. I mean... *really*!”

Amanda turns away with a straight face and begins looking around.

“Wait... my *ear's* upside down?!” Thian says, frantically feeling his left ear with his fingers, then his right. After a moment, *everyone* burst into laughter, Thian saying, “It is *not*! Very funny, Amanda, *ha* ha!”

Everyone laughs even harder, which helps calm them all down after their frightening trip. Even *Thian* soon chuckles, wearing a big grin.

They all begin to look around, glad they really have made it there alive and in one piece.

The alcove changes to a dull green glow. They look down what appears to be a winding tunnel, glowing a soft blue green, that leads off into the distance and curves to the right.

“Well, it looks like we made it okay,” Amanda says looking at the others. “We just need to follow that path. It ends at an ancient wooden door set right into the rock. From there, it leads to the huge cavern I told you about.”

“Yeah, sounds good to me,” Thian says turning to see Tia now hugging Tianna.

“Sis, how are you doing?” Tia asks with concern.

“Well, I’ve got to tell you, the *ride* was really scary, but, I kind of *enjoyed* it this time you know, having an idea of what to expect and all. But, I wish that somehow in the trip here, I wouldn’t *hurt* so much anymore.” They all look worried. Smiling, she says, “Oh don’t *worry*, I’m really *sore*, but I’m okay, really. And again, I feel *fully* refreshed. I’m not *tired* at all.”

As Amanda retrieves her flashlight from her pack, and slips it back on, she shakes the light for a moment to charge it and says, “We just need to walk down that pathway for a ways till we get to the door.” She stops shaking her flashlight and switches it on.

They begin to follow the dimly lighted pathway, which winds right and left several times before ending into *total* darkness, with only the light from Amanda’s beam illuminating the ancient door.

“Better get our *wands* out and light ‘em up.” Thian says limping up to the door and stopping. Everyone retrieves their wands and ignite them, the familiar blue glow from their tips now lighting a good portion of the cavern.

Amanda steps to the door and holding her broom arm high says, “Orathian!” The door clanks as it unlatches, then swings open as they all step inside, the door then shutting and latching behind them.

As Amanda shines her flashlight around, Tia says, “Amanda, try your wand. I mean, if you can *fly*, maybe you can get your wand to light too now and you won’t have to use that... *thing*.”

Everyone turns to look at Amanda. Amanda hesitates for a moment, then flips the flashlight off and hands it to Thian.

Amanda retrieves her wand from the wand holster she has on her belt, like the others have. Only having the wand and holster because everybody else does, she would only use the wand to practice movements with, when the others were *really* using theirs.

“Uh, okay,” Amanda says looking at the wand expectantly for a moment, then chewing her lower lip, her eyes narrow as she concentrates hard. “Lumino!” The tip of her wand *immediately* illuminates with a soft blue glow, right along with the rest of the other wands. Her jaw *drops*,

then a huge grin spreads across her face. When she looks up, everyone else has huge grins on *their* surprised faces too, Tianna smiling as she shakes her head, still in disbelief.

Amanda takes her flashlight from Thian, shimmies out of her backpack, stores the flashlight, and puts the pack back on.

Walking up to the huge cave-in a short distance away, they spread out to have a look around.

“Well, it’s *really* blocked,” Tia says as the others come together to stand at the center of the base of the debris.

“Let’s see if we can move the *top* of this heap to the sides of the cavern,” Tianna says stepping to one side. “Who knows how *thick* it is though, or what’s on the other side either. Could be right up against some *house* in a city now, or who *knows* what else.”

“As long as it’s not part of a *dam* or something, and we’re all *killed* by a flood,” Thian says looking around nervously.

“*Thanks* Thian!” Tianna says shaking her head. “As if we’re not *scared* enough you know?”

“But, what if it *caves* in even more when you three move some of this stuff away?” Amanda asks looking worried.

“Oh, yeah, *right!*” Thian says, eyeing some of the near house-sized boulders in the stack.

“Hadn’t *thought* of that. She’s right you know? Any of you know a spell to keep the place from caving *in* on us?”

No one does. Tianna says, “Well, we can’t go back without at least *trying*. I say let’s give it a go, but if we think something’s wrong, or something *bad* starts to happen, we get out quick, okay?”

They all agree.

“Let’s stack our traveler’s packs over there,” Tianna says pointing to an area not far away. They all slip out of their packs and place them in a pile along with their brooms, then walk back to face the cave-in.

Tia and Tianna walk to the right. Amanda watches as Thian points his wand at a huge boulder near the top of the pile, gives a *swish* of his wand and says, “Descendo!” Instead of the huge boulder moving away from the pile and descending, there is a *burst* of yellow bolts from Thian’s wand, striking the boulder, then *ricocheting* around the cavern making everyone yell and duck for cover, as other boulders *tumble* down the stack, starting more, but smaller rock slides.

“Thian, you *idiot!*” Tianna yells, rolling over to lay flat on her back with both hands clamped to her side. “You almost *hit* me you know! Just whose *side* are you on anyway? *Concentrate* for Henna’s sake, or *put* that thing away! You’re a *menace* to be around!”

Both Tia and Amanda are getting to their feet and brushing the dust off.

“I didn’t *mean* it!” Thian says, turning bright red from embarrassment. “I don’t know *why* that happened, and I *was* concentrating, alright!”

“Well concentrate *harder* then!” Tianna says as Tia helps her to her feet. Tianna growls, “And *stay* on that side of the cavern... away from *me!*”

Thian looks at Amanda, who smiles back and says, “Heck... could have happened to *anybody*. Go ahead Thian, try it again. I *know* you can do it.”

Licking his lips, Thian nervously points his wand at the huge boulder, gives a *swish* and says, “Descendo,” with a determined look of concentration on his face. The *huge* boulder moves, causing a small cascade of tumbling rocks, but moves away from the pile as Thian directs it to the far side of the cavern, and *gently* lowers it to the cavern floor.

Thian turns to Amanda with a huge grin, Amanda grinning with a nod.

Thian begins to move more boulders from the top of the pile near the ceiling, to the *left* side of the cavern, while Tia and Tianna begin moving boulders, rocks and dirt to the *right* side of the cavern, just by waving and moving their wands, each saying the proper, corresponding words.

After watching for a few minutes, Amanda looks at her glowing wand, then at a huge boulder near the top of the pile. “Well, either it’ll work, or nothing will happen at all,” she thinks.

Amanda swallows hard and gives a wave of her wand, while speaking one of the words for ‘move,’ deciding to use *Descendo*, while concentrating intently on the boulder. Surprised, but *thrilled*, she finds herself directing the huge boulder off to the left side of the cavern. When she has lowered it to the cavern floor, to rest right beside the huge, but *slightly* smaller one Thian had moved earlier, the others *cheer*, and begin to laugh, Tianna again *smiling* and shaking her head, still amazed Amanda can do any *Wizitch* at all.

It had taken Tianna *seven* months to move something without breaking her concentration. And now, here is Amanda, moving a *huge* house-sized boulder, smoothly across a vast cavern, to rest gently on the cavern floor, on her *first* try.

It has taken almost a full hour of moving boulders the size of a house, to small stones and *piles* upon piles of dirt, to either side of the cavern. There have been several *very* scary rock slides, with some huge boulders *crashing* to the cavern floor, then tumbling toward one of them, sending them scurrying out of the way and *scaring* them half to death as the others yell, but nothing serious happened.

They are just about to take a break when Tia yells, “Hey! *Look!* Up there near the top where I just moved that big boulder out of the way. Is that an *opening*? Looks *darker* doesn’t it? Like our wand light isn’t hitting whatever’s on the other side.”

Everyone looks for a moment, squinting into the darkness above.

“Thian, why don’t you fly up and have a look, okay?” Tianna says sitting against a large boulder where she has been resting while moving masses of the rubble away. Standing had just become too painful after a few minutes.

“Oh, uh, yeah, okay.” Thian limps over to his broom and travelers pack. He cinches up the knot on his bandage, wincing in pain. Mounting his broom, he kicks off, heading up and moving forward very slowly, looking at the ceiling for any sign of a cave-in, wand glowing in front of his outstretched arm.

Amanda watches as Thian slowly approaches the opening, which is large enough for them to fly through in single file.

Thian gets to the opening and goes about half-way through before stopping. Amanda sees him waving his wand around as he looks to see what is on the other side.

Moving in a little further, Thian turns around and flies back through the opening, then down toward them as he yells, “There’s *another* cavern on that side, or this *same* one maybe, if the cave-in hadn’t happened. It’s totally *dark* in there too. Can’t see all that much with just my wand alone. Let’s grab our stuff and take a *closer* look!” his voice echoing around the huge cavern.

He lands and slips into his travelers pack, Amanda helping Tia and Tianna into theirs. They mount their brooms and kick off. Soon they are slowly moving through the opening into the other cavern, Thian leading the way.

With her wand illuminating her way, Amanda slips through the opening, Tianna and Thian just in front of her. Thian says, “I *think* I see something over to our left, now that we have more light. Down there, just in *front* of us off to the left, against the side of the cavern wall... what is that?”

They stop in midair, side-by-side, about five feet apart. With their wands held out in front of them, their wand light barely reaches the odd structure.

This side of the cavern is very large as well, and Amanda can clearly see *something* off to the left, below and in front of them against the massive cavern wall, but cannot tell what it is.

“Have *no* idea,” Tianna says. “Kind of looks like the side of some odd shaped half *dome* standing against the wall or something. Come on, let’s take a look.” With that, Tianna still holding her side, moves forward, dropping slowly as she nervously looks around. The others follow close behind.

As they approach, the wand light shows more detail. Tia says, “Uh, guys? Doesn’t that kind of look like, uh, part of the side of a *huge* face or something? Like a *profile*?” They all freeze.

“Oh, my *god*!” Amanda says as her eyes go wide with recognition. “It *is*! It’s the *side* of a huge face carved out of the rock. Oh, I don’t like *this* at all!”

Tianna flies forward and down, as the others hesitate for a few moments, before following her off to the right.

They are still some distance away from the structure. Tianna keeps the same distance from the thing, but makes her way in an arc around to face the front. As everyone follows her, they soon see the *distinct* features of a gigantic face. The brow ridges are shaped to look angry, while its huge empty eye sockets appear to have large bags of skin below. It has a well-defined nose that *flares* as if in anger.

Tianna descends more, until she is low enough to look into the huge gaping mouth, which looks like it is locked in a silent scream, with its jaw slanting down and *into* the cavern floor, at the level of its lower lip.

There are no teeth, just a *hideous* gaping mouth, with a *large* well-formed tongue leading to the back of the throat. There, it seems to flare as the insides of the mouth curve toward the back, and the roof of the mouth curves in an arc, all ending at what looks like a dark cave.

They all land and dismount, then walk forward toward the huge, oddly shaped rock formation.

Standing about thirty feet in front of the structure, they look up at the end of the nose, about twenty-five feet over their heads in front of them.

They all look at one another nervously, then Tianna walks forward saying, “Hey, that looks like some kind of *pathway* leading into the mouth, toward the tongue just over the lip there. Let’s follow that.”

“Wait!” Thian calls. “Uh, Amanda, does the Journal say anything about, um, this *face* thing?”

“No. And I’ve read the Journal from *cover* to cover at least a *dozen* times over the past few months, and it doesn’t say *anything* about it. Maybe... maybe it wasn’t even *here* when the Journal was written.”

“Well, it’s *here* now,” Tia says stepping up beside Tianna who is studying the gap inside the dark open mouth.

“I’ll go first,” Tianna says stepping forward.

“No! Wait!” Amanda cries jogging quickly to take up a position in front of them all. “We don’t know *what* might be in there!”

“Well, we won’t find out by staying *here*!” Tianna shoots back hotly. “And, we sure can’t go *back*, because we *do* know what’s waiting for us there. *One* of us has to go first, and, *I’m* hurt already, so...”

“So, it makes *more* sense that one of *us* go instead of you!” Tia shouts.

“*You* just want to be the first one to discover what’s *in* there is all!” Tianna sneers. “And you and *Thian* are hurt, too.”

“Oh for *heaven’s* sake! *I’ll* go first!” Amanda says as she walks forward nervously. “Listen, again, *I’m* the one that *supposedly* can’t be killed easily, at least that’s what Josh and Sam *think*. So, I’ll go first.”

“Forget it!” Thian says. “I say, we *all* go together. We got *this* far together, so, let’s *keep* it that way okay?”

Everyone looks a little upset with one another, but then Tianna says, “Yeah, well, *come* on then. Let’s see what’s in there. Probably nothing at all anyway. It probably just leads to the way out of this *stupid* mountain, is all.”

They all walk to the very opening of the hideous mouth, and with wands outstretched lighting the way, they step up over the lower lip and walk a short way in.

The tongue takes up *almost* the entire width of the inside of the mouth, and curves nicely down at the front, near where they are standing. The sides of the tongue are slightly curved up, the top of which is well over their heads.

It is rather thick, and the top of the very tip, which is curved downward slightly, is about shoulder height to the kids. There appears to be a rather narrow groove leading down the very center of the tongue, just like the groove in most real tongues. The entire tongue is made from hundreds of rectangular and curving stones.

“Well, it *looks* safe enough,” Thian says, stepping forward and putting his broom up on the tongue. With a groan, he hoists himself up, giving a small yelp as his injured leg scrapes across the stone, leaving a streak of blood from his soaked bandage.

Turning and sitting on the very tip of the tongue, he holds his arms up, like he is protecting himself from being hit, and says, “*Please*, don’t *eat* me! Don’t *eat* me!”

Everyone cannot help but laugh.

Thian takes the others brooms and helps them up onto the tongue.

“This is *really* creepy you know?” Tia says picking up her broom. “What do you think this thing is for anyway? It looks like it’s the only thing in here.”

“Haven’t a clue,” Tianna says, holding her side after Thian and Amanda helped her up onto the tongue. “But let’s keep going and see what’s back there - in that little cave near the throat. There’s probably just a *door* that leads outside is all.”

They have walked in a ways when Tianna says, “Hey, *Look!*”

Everyone looks where Tianna is pointing down at the tongue. It looks as though there is some kind of *writing*, mostly covered by dirt and dust from the cave-in.

Thian walks over and uses the end of his broom to sweep away the layers of dirt.

There *is* writing, along with a crudely carved line running horizontally across the tongue, just before where the writing begins.

As Thian sweeps the dirt from the grooves of the writing, this is what everyone sees:

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“What’s it say?” Amanda asks. “I don’t remember seeing that language before. Is it some kind of *Elf* or Dwarf writing?”

“I don’t *think* so,” Thian says, stepping up to the line to look at the writing. “I think I’ve *seen* it before though, in some of my older books. Can either of you read it?”

Both Tia and Tianna shake their head. Tia says, “But I’m sure *I*’ve seen it too. I just don’t remember where though.”

“But Amanda,” Thian says, “I thought Josh and Samantha said you could understand, *read* and write over four *thousand* languages. How come *you* can’t read this?”

“I don’t know. But remember, I couldn’t understand any of *you*, or Loki and his dad either, until I *touched* you while you were speaking. Then, I could understand you, and even read and write that language too, because of this necklace. Maybe I *still* need to do that for now, you know? *Touch* somebody who either speaks it, or, maybe even just knows it.” They all nod.

“Well, maybe it’s some kind of welcome message or something,” Thian says, stepping over the line and walking on, looking up to the roof of the mouth.

“Just welcoming visitors to their realm or something.”

The others hesitate for a moment, then Tianna shrugs and walks forward after Thian. Tia and Amanda lock nervous eyes for a moment, then, after chewing on her lower lip for a second, Amanda shrugs with a sigh, shakes her head, and together, the two of them quickly walk on to catch up.

They only go a short distance, when Thian steps on a rectangular stone that makes a distinct *clank* that everyone hears. A second later, the *entire* tongue suddenly drops down about five inches, making them all *scream* and throw their arms out for balance. A *horrendous* grinding sound reverberates around them, *shaking* the entire cavern. The tip of the tongue begins to tilt up quickly, as the back begins to lower, the *horrible* grinding sound *chilling* them to the bone.

“What’s *happening*?” Amanda yells trying to stay on her feet.

“I think *Thian* triggered some kind of *trap*!” Tianna yells back, clearly in pain.

They try to run back to the opening of the mouth, but the tongue tilts up so quickly they have *no* chance of making it, and they lose their footing. As the tip of the tongue races for the roof of the mouth, the kids, scared and screaming, are thrown off their feet and begin *tumbling* toward the back of the throat.

They have dropped both their brooms and wands, now *desperately* clawing at the rough tongue, *trying* to stop themselves from sliding back into the throat, as if about to be *swallowed*. A new *large* slanting tunnel appears, as the back of the tongue lowers enough to reveal it.

Screaming and *scratching* at the stones of the tongue, they tumble *helplessly* into the darkness of the wide and almost *vertically* smooth and polished tunnel.

After a brief moment, the tip of the tongue begins to lower as the back rises, *sealing* the tunnel they have slid into, along with any *possible* escape.

In a few more moments, the tongue has returned to its lowered position, resetting the trap.

The gaping mouth is empty once again, and all is as quiet as a *tomb* within the huge chamber.

Only swirls of *dust* are left drifting in the still air, to show that anything has happened at all.

## The Bone Pit

[To TOC](#)

Screaming, crying and *scared* out of their minds, the kids tumble and slide helplessly down the slanting, smooth as glass tunnel. It twists and turns as it narrows, *spiraling* down deeper into the root of the mountain.

There is absolutely *nothing* to grab hold of whatsoever. All the kids can do is continue to slide *helplessly*, out of control.

Abruptly, the tunnel ends and they pop out, like being *shot* from the end of a very long and steep slide. Whipping into nothing but air, they *frantically* thrash and wave their arms and legs, *screaming* as they fly and arc downward, until they crash to a halt far below, accompanied by horrible *crunching*, cracking and *snapping* sounds.

Hurting all over, her vision blurry and head swimming, Amanda hears the screams from the others, along with frantic thrashing. As Amanda tries to move, she hears *cracking* and crunching sounds around her, as she begins to *drop*. Her vision clears as her heart pounds, hearing her friends terrified screams.

There is *just* enough light from one of their wands, which has somehow managed to make the trip with them. Having fallen somewhere nearby, it has *somehow* managed to stay lit, illuminating the scene in front of her.

In an instant, Amanda realizes she is resting on, and partly *covered*, by a pile of skeletal bones and *skulls*.

*Spiders* and beetles are scurrying everywhere across her body, and everyplace else she looks. This sends her into a *screaming* and thrashing fit of her own, sending her crashing further and further down into the deep bone pit.

The sound of cracking, breaking and *shattering* bones is *deafening* in the cylindrical chamber they are trapped in, filling them all with *mind* numbing terror.

They have landed in a huge pile of *skeletons*, about seven to eight feet deep. The more they *thrash* the deeper into the bones they sink, *spiders* and beetles, making the dimly lit bones look as though they ripple with creepy *crawling* flesh.

The chamber they are in *stinks* - the air is stale, damp and *putrid*.

A large spider *crawls* quickly into Amanda's left nostril, sending her into another *violent* fit of thrashing, as she tries *repeatedly* to blow the creature out. She can feel *dozens* of beetles crawling over her arms, legs, and worst of all, *scurrying* across her face, as she *frantically* tries to scrape and flick them away.

As Amanda continues to sink, she looks up through the mass of bones that have tumbled over her, *directly* into the empty eye sockets of a *skull* peering down at her, which is resting on, and appears to be looking through a *rib* cage. An ugly, *large*, dark green beetle scurries out of the skull's eye socket, dropping onto Amanda's hair near her forehead. It scurries through her hair, *down* her forehead, and right across her wide, *frightened* open eye, making her *scream*, not only from fright, but from the pain, as the sharp *spiked* feet of the beetle jabs her open eye.

As everyone continues to thrash in panic, they sink deeper into the bone pit. In another moment, Amanda feels herself thrashing in *moss* covered bones – *wet* bones.

Suddenly, she feels her legs hit something wet and thick, like mud. Frantically looking around in the very dim blue light from the one lit wand, she finds that she and the others have *shattered* and broken through most of the bones, and have reached what she *thinks* may be the bottom of the pit.

Her legs sink into something more like a medium-thick, *stinking* mud, green with slime and with bones sticking out of it at various angles. Amanda sees several *half* submerged skulls at various angles, sticking out of the muck around her. One is *face* up, and half buried, its hollow eye sockets staring up toward the ceiling. Its mouth is open wide, as if in a *silent* scream of its own, the lower jaw having separated a few inches, making the opening *huge*, showing many missing and broken teeth.

Realizing she is *wrong* about this being the bottom of the pit, Amanda feels herself sinking deeper into the cold mud, but still cannot feel the bottom. Soon, waist deep in the thick, *stinking* mire, she feels something cold moving on her arm. Looking down quickly, she *screams* as she sees some kind of *pitch* black millipede over a *foot* long, and about an *inch* thick, making its way onto and *up* her arm.

So *scared* now she feels faint, *sure* she will pass out and be *eaten* by all these creepy crawlers, Amanda hears Tia's *blood-curdling* screams, and snaps her head around, looking in her direction.

Amanda's eyes fly wide as she sees *dozens* and dozens of millipedes, making their way over Tia's body. Tia is thrashing, and trying to *jump* to get away from them, but with nothing to jump *from* in this thick, seemingly *bottomless* glop, Tia turns and looks like she is trying to *swim*, which briefly reveals her left leg as she attempts a kick.

Amanda sees that where Tia's lower body has been below the mud line, she is *covered* with dozens of *leaches*, clinging to and *wriggling* on her body. The mud is *far* too thick to swim in, and Tia returns to an upright position, hands *frantically* trying in vain to wipe away the *dozens* of beetles, and other *scurrying* creatures covering her mud drenched face.

Amanda looks down at her own body, feeling things *slithering* all over her legs and body beneath the mud, where she cannot see.

Amanda hears Tianna yelling, *clearly* in severe pain, "Thian! Do you have your wand?"

"No! I dropped it with my broom when we fell. Do you have *yours*!?"

"No, you *idiot*! That's why I'm asking *you*! I dropped mine too. I lost my *travelers* pack too. Tia... Amanda... do you have *your* wands?"

Tia yells, "No! I dropped mine along with my broom, and I lost *my* pack too!"

Tia *shrieks* as Amanda watches a thick, *slimy* millipede, almost two feet long, scurry up the back of Tia's neck and into her hair, where it gets *tangled* and begins *thrashing* violently, tossing her muddy hair in all directions. Amanda feels sick at the sight.

"I lost *my* wand and broom too, but I've *still* got my pack!" Amanda yells, grabbing the millipede, which is halfway up her robe at her armpit. Scrunching up her face, she *flings* the millipede away from her, where it strikes a half-submerged leg bone, drops into the mud and disappears behind a broken, half submerged skull.

For the first time, Amanda notices *hundreds* of long, ugly, *slippery* worms wriggling in the thick mud, having been stirred up by their *thrashing* and kicking in the slimy muck.

Looking around, Amanda sees Thian, who is against the cylindrical wall to her left, reach up and grab hold of a brick sticking out from the side of their pit.

The thought crosses her mind that they must be in some kind of deep well.

Struggling, he pulls himself partially out of the mud and slithering creatures. He is slightly bent at the knees, and Amanda knows he must be standing on another brick beneath the mud.

There is another brick sticking out from the wall, about two feet above the one Thian has grabbed onto. Reaching up with one hand, he grabs onto the upper brick and begins to hoist himself up out of the stinking mud.

“Hey, look!” Thian yells. “These bricks that stick out go all the way up to the tunnel. See if you guys can make your way over here. Maybe we can *climb* out! Come on, follow me!”

“I... I can't *make* it!” Tianna cries. “I'm having trouble even staying up... my side... it *hurts* too much! It's *killing* me... I *can't* stay up! I'm sinking!”

“I'm *coming*, Tianna!” Amanda cries out, seeing that Tia is very close to the wall where Thian has begun climbing the bricks, straining under the pain in his injured leg.

Tianna is only a short distance away from where Amanda is now struggling to move.

“Tia, *go*!” Amanda yells. “Follow Thian *out* of here! I'll get to Tianna and help her!”

Amanda begins *swiveling* her body, as she uses her arms to try to pull herself through the thick, slimy and *stinking* mud. Her feet find *bones* to stand occasionally, helping her move until they snap below her.

It is all Amanda can do to *force* herself to keep going and help Tianna. Tianna had tried one last *desperate* move, trying to *swim* like Tia had tried. But as Tianna's body rose for a moment, Amanda could see that every *inch* of her body, was *crawling* with slithering worms, *leaches*, beetles, *spiders* and millipedes. Even what *used* to be Tianna's long, *beautiful*, golden hair, is *thick* with mud, a mass of *moving* and thrashing creatures giving it a life of its own.

Tianna stops moving, the pain finally overwhelming her, and she begins to sink. Seeing Tianna begin to slip under the mud, only her face tilted up out of the muck, Amanda doubles her efforts.

Pushing bones, skulls, and *piles* of slithering creatures out of her way, she soon manages to reach Tianna as she slips *completely* under. The pain in Tianna's side, from the *tumbling* across the rough tongue, and then *striking* the bones when she fell, now makes it *impossible* for her to struggle any longer.

“NOOO!” Amanda screams as she nears the place where Tianna has slipped under, only the *tips* of Tianna's hands still scratching at the air. Watching the fingers slip under, Amanda quickly reaches the now empty spot. Grimacing, while *swallowing* hard, Amanda turns on her side and *thrusts* her arm under the mud, and as *gently* as she can, feels around until she grabs Tianna's arm, feeling a slimy leach *squish* in her grasp, as others *burst* between her fingers.

With all her might, Amanda *pulls* Tianna up to the surface and drags her, *coughing* and spitting, to her side. Tianna *screams* from the pain, then choking, spits several more wads of slimy mud from her mouth, gasping for air, doing her best to wrap an arm around Amanda, crying *hysterically*, while hanging on for dear life.

Still gulping in the air, Tianna spits some more, then reaching up with her free hand, begins *trying* to pull off a *fat*, muddy *leach* that is firmly attached to her lower lip. The leach and her hands are so slick, it is *useless*.

Wiping the mud from her eyes as best she can, Tianna says weakly through clinched teeth, from the crippling pain in her ribs, “Tha... *thanks*. I couldn't kept from going under. Too much pain. I never would have been able to come back up. The *pain* is so bad I can hardly move at all now. How are we... going to get up that *wall* without a wand?”

Amanda cannot think of the answer. It is all *she* can do to move in the thick mud, with *slithering* things trying to run up her body, or across it, or *into* her mouth every time she tries to take a breath or to speak.

*Millipedes*, worms, leaches, beetles and *spiders* are almost *completely* covering them now.

They are all being *bitten* and stung over and over again.

Amanda has *no* idea *how* she is going to get all the way across the pit, to the wall where Thian continues to slowly make his way up, brick-by-brick, *crying* out every time he puts

pressure on his injured leg, let alone *how* she is going to manage to haul Tianna to the wall, then figure out how she is going to *climb* those bricks taking *Tianna* up with her.

Tia has finally reached the wall and has hoisted herself up out of the mire, in spite of her injured shoulder. It has taken her several tries before managing to tough through the pain, but she now hoists herself up to reach the next brick above her, some eight feet above the muck.

Seeing Tia clinging to the brick, Amanda turns her head quickly away from Tianna, and *throws* up. Tia has *dozens* of long leaches hanging and *thrashing* from her arms and legs, and several long *black* ones dangling from her face. Two are attached to her lips, and Amanda can see that one has clamped onto Tia's closed right eye. Tianna sees it too, gasping at the sight.

About to *pass* out again, Amanda looks up to see Thian reach up and grab hold of the next brick above his head. As he pulls hard, to hoist himself up, the brick *noticeably* tilts down about five inches at a steep angle, causing Thian to *lose* his grip and fall screaming, knocking Tia from the wall below him.

Screaming as they fall, they are soon back in the stinking, *slithering* mud, and for a moment, they *completely* disappear below the muck, sending both Tianna and Amanda into a screaming fit of terror.

Suddenly, they hear a horrible *grinding* sound, like rock on rock, followed quickly by the sound of rushing water, just as both Thian and Tia had clawed their way back to the surface, thrashing wildly.

Looking up toward the tunnel they had all fallen from, Amanda *scrapes* some spiders and beetles scurrying across her face, still keeping hold of Tianna, just in time to see a rush of water *explode* from the tunnel far above them.

It is as though a flood gate has been opened to create a *crushing* waterfall, and the destination of the falls, is their little bone pit.

The water quickly floods their pit, and they begin to rise. Bones, skulls and *slithering* creatures are everywhere.

It does not take long before much of the mud has thinned to nothing more than *filthy*, slimy stinking water, filled with slithering and *writhing* creatures.

Amanda and the others begin treading water, moving bones out of their way to stay afloat.

Tianna is *screaming* from the pain, trying to stay afloat and *not* pass out.

"*Tianna*, try to *float* on your back if you can, okay? I'll help you, I *won't* leave you!"

Amanda yells over the sound of the crashing water.

Grunting in pain, Tianna clutching her side with one hand, her other arm still around Amanda, tilts back and assumes a floating position, several bones resting across her body as her legs *pop* to the surface, *completely* covered with *squirming* leaches and writhing creatures.

"What's *happening*?" Amanda yells frantically pulling a small millipede from her right ear, as it tries to *burrow* its way in. Amanda *thrashes* her head around to dislodge *dozens* of beetles who are clinging for life near the ends of her wet muddy hair.

"I think *Thian* tripped another *trap* of some kind," Tia yells some way off, her voice almost lost over the sound of crashing water. "*What* are we gonna do? I don't *see* any other way out!"

Tianna frantically looks around while doing her best to stay afloat, still crying from the unbearable pain.

Everyone is moving to reach one another while looking for their wands and brooms, which are nowhere to be seen.

The wand that managed to fall into the pit with them is on the far side of the pit, where the mud and mass of bones are being pushed up against the wall. The *force* of the water has pushed

the wand up against and *under* a huge pile of bones, and is now *trapped* there. There is *no* way anyone can see to get to it, without being *sucked* under the pile themselves, jammed into the mud bank, and *drowned* by the forcefully falling water.

The water rises so quickly, they are soon being forced back from the tunnel above them, now nothing but a *giant* faucet, the water pressure sending them into *panicked* swirling, like being in a giant glass someone is stirring.

Forced upward by the surging water, they are soon higher than the tunnel they had entered, the water now *flooding* in below them. The light from the trapped wand is so faint, they can hardly see a thing.

Even though the wand is stuck tight, trapped under the water and pile of bones, they *know* they are headed for the ceiling, where there is *no* way out.

Everyone is *scratching* at the walls as the swirling water brings them close enough to reach them. They are looking for *any* hidden way out, when Tianna, floating on her back yells, "Look! There're small *holes* in the ceiling!"

The others look up and see *dozens* of holes, each about six inches in diameter, leading *up* into the rocky ceiling of the cavern.

"Oh *no*!" Thian yells. "That means the *water* will rise up into those holes and..."

"We'll be forced *completely* under, with *no* trapped air pocket!" Tianna yells back. "We're... we're going to *drown*! We're going to *drown* and there's no other way *out*! Amanda, *do* something!"

"*Me*? I... I can't do anything! I don't *know* what to do!"

"Use the *necklace*!" Tianna growls through clenched teeth, her side killing her. "*Wake* it up or something. Why isn't it *saving* us?"

"I don't know *how* to... *wake* it up, or *how* to use it! I... I don't know *why* it's not helping!"

Seconds later, they are floating on their backs, faces and bodies pressing up against the ceiling.

They have all taken their *last* breaths as the water rises over them, their bodies pressed flat to the ceiling by the pressure. The water *continues* to rise up and into the holes, leaving them *no* air pockets at all.

With their last ounce of strength, they scratch and *claw* at the ceiling like trapped animals - *ripping* and tearing their fingernails against the rough and *jagged* rock ceiling, in a frantic, *primal* attempt to dig through solid stone.

Amanda, *filled* with indescribable terror, knows that *this* is the end of her young life, and that the *necklace* has done nothing to save her.

If it is *so* powerful, and since she *is* the one wearing it, *why* has it not saved... *her*? After all, she was not *supposed* to be able to be killed easily.

Amanda, with her last *burst* of primitive fear, rips at the stone ceiling, feeling the ends of her fingers *tearing* against the jagged stone.

## To The Rescue

[To TOC](#)

Amanda holds her breath as long as she can. She begins to feel a *tingling* shoot through her entire body. She can see through the muddy water stinging her eyes, that she has *somehow*, actually begun to *glow*. She begins to hear strange voices in her head, which sound like people *yelling* different things at her in different languages - things she should do, but she cannot quite understand them. It is as though they are yelling at her from someplace *far* away.

About to black out, there is a *blinding* flash. The next thing Amanda knows, she is *thrashing* once again in swirling water, as she quickly rises *through* where the ceiling had been only a split second before.

Gasping for air, Amanda coughs, then feels herself lifted from the water as she begins *floating* through the air, toward a *huge* jagged gap in the side of the pit above her. She is still holding onto Tianna, who is *also* floating through the air on her back, gasping, *coughing*, holding her side, crying and moaning in great pain, only *half* conscious.

As Amanda wipes some of the sludge from her face and eyes, she *flicks* away some scurrying beetles. As her vision clears and she rises over the jagged opening she had seen, Amanda is *shocked* to see the tiny girl, *Sadie*, wand outstretched and illuminated, just a short distance away, pointed directly at her.

Sadie is moving Amanda and the others through the air toward her, as she quickly walks backward, making her way into another cavern. Sadie continues up a short incline away from the water, which has reached its highest point, and is flooding into *another* tunnel on the other side of where Amanda is floating.

In a moment, as Amanda and the others are still coughing and sucking in air, Sadie lowers them to the dirt floor near her feet. Sadie waves her wand as she mumbles something, *instantly* vanishing all the critters from their bodies.

Looking around in a panic, frantically running her hands over her *stinging* face and through her hair, looking for any *remaining* creatures, Amanda suddenly spits out a chunk of slimy moss. She then reaches up and pulls a *bony* hand from her hair, tangled there from her *thrashing* in the pit. She drops it to the floor, scooting away from it, and turns to look at the others. The others, other than Tianna, are looking around wide-eyed and running their hands over their bodies too, surprised to see they are *bug* and critter free.

Thian has a *huge* chunk of moss draped over his head, making him look like he has short, *curly*, muddy green hair. His eyes are wide with fright, and he has large globs of mud clinging to him everywhere.

Tia sits up *shaking* her head like a dog, trying to dislodge any critters that may still be *hiding* and tangled in her wet muddy hair.

Tianna is lying on her back, both hands clutching her side. Her eyes are closed and she is crying, moaning and gasping in short staccato-like breaths from the pain.

Amanda looks up and sees Sadie give another flurry of wand movements, speaking something that Amanda cannot hear. Then, with a start, Amanda realizes she is *completely* dry, covered only with layers of dried mud, which crack and fall away as she moves. Looking around, she notices that everyone *else* is dry as well, and just as startled as she is.

Thian yells, "Those *bugs* tried to *eat* us alive! I'm *bit* and stung all over! By the *moons*, it *really* hurts!"

Still in shock, Amanda looks down at herself and sees dozens and dozens of places where blood is *soaking* through the dry, caked-on mud. She finds herself saying faintly, as though still in a daze, “They, they *did* try to eat us, didn’t they?” Then for the first time, she feels the *stinging* all over her, as her head begins to clear more, and she is able to focus.

Amanda hears Sadie say something as she flicks her wand, but again cannot make it out.

In another moment, Sadie is directing everyone’s wand, broom and lost travelers pack through the air, then lowers them into a pile to her side, including the still-*lit* wand that had been stuck in the bones and mud.

Tianna opens her eyes for the first time and looks around, her eyes locking on the tiny girl. “Sadie?” Tianna asks, still half-dazed and speaking through clenched teeth.

“How? How did you *get* here? How did you... *find* us? What, what happened?”

“Please don’t be *mad* at me Tianna,” Sadie says as she kneels by Tianna’s side, tears in her eyes. She notices that Tianna is clutching her side and wincing. “Tianna, you’re *really* hurt! I’m, I’m *sorry*! I didn’t *mean* to hurt you, *honest*, I didn’t *mean* it! I was only trying to *help*!”

Glancing at the others, Sadie sees that Thian’s leg is bleeding, and that Tia’s shoulder is bleeding through her fingers. “Oh no! I hurt *all* of you! I’m *so* sorry! I just wanted to get you *out* of there, is all. *Please* don’t be mad at me!”

“*Mad* at you?” Tia says confused, sitting up straight while still trying to stop the bleeding from her shoulder. She, Thian and Tianna had lost their bandages in the pit.

“What *happened*? The last thing I remember, I was about to *drown*. Then, well, there was a *flash* and here we are, and, here *you* are Sadie.”

Sadie’s little face looks really scared, as a small tear leaks from one eye, and runs down her cheek. She clears her throat and says, “I, well, I *followed* you. And, um, I saw you in that *pit* under the ground. So, so I *blasted* a hole through the side of the cavern wall, and then blew away the floor... I mean, the *ceiling* in there too, to let you rise up with the water.

“Then, uh, well, then I cast a *movement* spell and brought all of you here. I got rid of all those *awful* creatures you were all covered with, and *dried* you off. Then I summoned your wands, brooms and travelers packs.

“I’m really *sorry* I hurt you! I didn’t *mean* it Tianna!” Sadie notices the blood flowing from Thian’s leg and from Tia’s shoulder again. She gasps and breaks into tears crying, “I’m *sorry*, I didn’t mean to hurt you, *really*, I only wanted to help!”

“Sadie, it’s *okay*, honest,” Tianna groans. “You *didn’t* hurt me, Tia or Thian either. We were *already* hurt from... well, from before. Then we got here and *fell* into some kind of *bone* pit. I landed on my hurt side and I *really* got hurt. It’s not your fault. You *saved* my life... *all* our lives! But Sadie, how in *two* moons did you *get* here? And *how* did you know where we were?”

Sadie looks at everyone nervously for a brief moment, then sits on the ground next to Tianna, stowing her wand in a wand holster tied to her belt.

Taking a steadying breath, Sadie tells them how she had been at the village when the fighting broke out. That she had gone looking for Tianna to thank her for being so nice to her, before she went back to her home realm.

Sadie tells them how she had seen Amanda fight the really bad man named Blaine. That she had seen a woman lying in the street, and that some *goblin* had run out and jumped on her, then the two of them disappeared. How some lady had picked Sadie up and ran away from the fighting, as Sadie fought to get away from her. How she *had* gotten away and when she returned to the scene, she saw Amanda, Thian, Tia, Tianna and Loki talking to the man who had been there, when he and a woman started *fighting* everyone. Later, how Sadie had snuck up and

hidden close enough, to hear the man tell them that they needed to get to Thian's cabin. That their brooms had arrived and they shot off, with Amanda and Thian riding a tandem broom.

"I asked around some time later about where you *lived* Thian, and some old lady with *really* singed hair and *no* eyebrows, did some *horrible* swearing, then pointed off toward the mountains and told me where you lived. Said I shouldn't go anywhere *near* you, if I knew what was *good* for me. And that if you pulled your wand.... *run!* I don't know *why* she said that."

All the kids look at Thian with weak smiles. Thian turns a little red, flicking some dried mud off his shoulder and shrugs.

"But Sadie," Thian asks, "why didn't we see you at my house? Couldn't you *find* it?"

"Oh, I *found* it alright. Took me a while, but then I spotted some people all dressed in black, flying brooms *really* close to the tree line. It didn't *look* right somehow. So, I stayed out of sight and watched them flying around *real* slow. It looked like they were *searching* for something.

"Then, all of a sudden, there were *several* wand-cast flares, and they all turned and dropped down into the trees and I *lost* them. I followed to where I *thought* the flares had come from, and saw lots of *flashes* coming through the trees."

"That must be when *Tianna* and I showed up," Tia says nodding. "Obviously, somebody *else* must have known where your house was Thian. They must have sent a *bunch* of flyers to scout the area for all of us, *just* in case we were getting away on foot, or flying low through the trees or something. When some *got* to your house, they sent up flare shots to warn the others to stay out of sight.

"*That's* why they were waiting for us! Sadie must have gotten there *just* after Tianna and I had entered the house, and Loki, Tianna and I were *shooting* back at them."

"Soon the entire *house* was in flames," Sadie shivers from the memory. "They had cast a *complete* Appareo net over the house too. So, I *knew* there wasn't any way that you could have gotten out."

"What's an Appareo net?" Amanda asks looking puzzled.

"It's a *really* advanced tactical spell," Thian says shaking his head. "It prevents *anyone* using the Appareo spell, to *vanish* from the area protected by the net. So, you can't *vanish* from one place and *arrive* in another, like we usually do.

"Man. I didn't know they had done *that*. If we didn't have the hidden *trap* door, and used it to take the tunnel into the forest..."

"We would have been *burned* alive!" Tianna says, wincing as she takes a shallow breath.

"They stayed there for a long time too," Sadie continues. "Then there was a *lot* of flashing, coming from off in the distance from where I was hiding. They all took off and headed in that direction. I followed as quickly as I could, weaving between the trees, just below the tree tops, to stay out of sight. I saw a lot of flyers *chasing* all of you. And I saw Amanda do some *really* amazing flying, and shoot some people *right* off their brooms too!"

Amanda looks nervous, as everyone looks at her for just a moment.

Sadie continues. "Then two *other* flyers came in really fast from way off in the distance."

"That must have been *Josh* and *Samantha*!" Tia says.

Sadie continues to tell them how she had followed them to Thian's cabin, had fallen asleep on the forest floor just inside the tree line, and had woken when she heard voices. How she watched Amanda fly in circles, like she was *learning* to fly a broom, and how Sadie could not figure out why.

"Then, I saw Amanda fly up to the tree tops, and all of *you* joined her, and then flew off like *crazy* people."

“Yeah, we *did*,” Amanda laughs. “But as you can see, Loki didn’t come here with us though.”

“Oh, I *know*. I talked to him later.”

“What?!” Thian asks. “What do you *mean* you talked to him later? Later... *when*?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute,” Sadie says clearing her throat.

“That must have been when Loki saw what he *thought* was a flock of big birds...” Tia says nodding, “which turned *out* to be a bunch of *really* bad people.”

“I think you’re right,” Sadie says brushing the hair from her face. “Because as I followed again from a distance, not knowing *what* was going on, you all got into a *huge* fight and people were *dropping* like Kellis!”

“Amanda did some really amazing *flying* stunts again - I couldn’t *believe* what she was doing! I saw *Tianna* get hit, at least it *looked* like her from where I was, and she dove down into the trees.

“After the fighting, *you* all disappeared into the trees too. I was *really* scared, and I stayed back. I waited for a while, then you all came out of the trees and *shot* off low to the ground. I was still really scared. I *couldn’t* understand what was going on, and almost left, but, I decided to *follow* you anyway. I followed as far away as I could... I didn’t want to get all of you in *trouble* if someone saw me.

“I followed you to a *pretty* lake, back near Thian’s place. You hovered there for a minute, then turned and went straight up the face of the mountain. You all kept looking around, like you didn’t *want* to be seen. Made *me* nervous too, and *I* kept looking around afraid that somebody might see me. So, I just stayed low in the trees and stayed at the base and watched.

“I stayed in the trees until I saw you all *land* on some kind of ledge way up the mountain. I *started* to come out, when it looked like *one* of you was *pointing* down the mountain at me, or maybe some *bad* guys I couldn’t see. I got scared and ducked back into the shadows.”

“It was *you* that I saw!” Tianna gasps. Then turning to the others says, “I *told* you I saw someone down at the tree line! It was *Sadie*!”

“You turned and disappeared from sight,” Sadie continues. “I thought I might *lose* you, so I Appareo’d to the ledge *just* in time to hear someone say, a *really* strange word from somewhere within the vine-covered mountainside. At first, I *thought* someone said, ‘or a *Thian*.’

“I *thought* I heard a door squeak open in the vines. I waited a minute to listen, then began making my way in through all those hanging vines. They were *really* thick, and it felt like I was getting all *turned* around in there.

“I was getting really scared again, and was *about* to turn around, when all of a sudden, I came to an *old* wooden door. I pressed my ear against it and listened for a minute, but couldn’t hear anything. I tried to open it, but it wouldn’t open. I tried and *tried*, but it wouldn’t budge. I tried *several* opening and movement spells, but *nothing* worked. Then I thought about how *odd* it was, that someone had said, ‘or a *Thian*,’ like there could be *more* than one of him with you, you know?

“I thought about it for a minute, trying to think of what *else* could have been said instead. I then ran the words together and said, ‘*Orathian*’ and the door opened! *Scared* me half to death too!”

Everyone laughs, with Tianna holding her side and gasping in shallow breaths.

Sadie then continues. “I followed a winding dirt pathway down a tunnel, and heard Amanda... at least, I *think* it was Amanda... say loudly *another* funny word, ‘Transportia.’

“As I was continuing to follow the path, I saw a *flash* of light. It *scared* me, so I pressed my back against the wall, and waited for a few seconds. Then there was just a faint glow down the tunnel. I didn’t know *what* to do, so I waited for a few more minutes just *listening*, trying to hear what you were doing, because I wasn’t sure what was really happening, or if you had run into *bad* people or something.

“After a while though, I decided to see what you were doing, or if you *were* all right. I had my wand out, and after taking a couple of breaths to stop *shaking* and get my nerve up, I *whipped* around the corner ready to *fight*! When I rounded that last corner of the pathway though, the *only* thing there, was an *empty* alcove.”

“I bet we *just* left,” Thian says with a grin.

“I guess you did,” Sadie says with a huge sigh. “I couldn’t figure out *where* you had gone! I walked *all* around the alcove, then back down the path a ways. I thought maybe there was a *hidden* passage that I hadn’t seen. I tried *all* the spells on the walls I could think of, to show a hidden passageway, but *nothing* worked.”

“Wait... *you* know how to show where *hidden* passages are?” Tia asks impressed. “We don’t learn that kind of stuff until, we’re about *seventeen* or eighteen. How did *you* learn it?”

“Oh, uh, well, where *I* come from, we learn *lots* of stuff at a pretty early age I *guess*. Anyway, nothing worked. So, I sat there for a really long time *thinking* of what to do. I was about to give up and leave, when I remembered *Amanda*, or whoever it was, had said that *strange* word, ‘Transportia.’ So, I got up and grabbed my broom. I stood in the alcove and said really loud, ‘*Transportia!*’ Wow! Was *that* a trip or *what*?”

Everyone *roars* with laughter... poor Tianna crying out in pain with every gasp of breath, as tears run down her face, both from *laughing* and the pain, watching *tiny* Sadie shake her little head.

Sadie laughs then says, “When I *finally* knew that I was *still* alive, and not just some kind of weird rainbow *smoke* anymore, when I got to, well, *wherever* it was, I looked around the little chamber, but I couldn’t see *any* of you there either.”

She tells them how she had walked to the door and listened, hearing them on the other side, then how she had followed them to the huge chamber with the eleven doors, *hid* behind the door and just listened, trying to figure out *how* she was going to tell them why she followed them, and *not* get in trouble. Then, she heard them returning, and had run back into the smaller room, back through the door and down the path.

“I got into the alcove and waited, like I had just shown up you know? But *you* didn’t show up. So, I went back down the tunnel to the door. I heard you all talking about *Amanda* going someplace first, to see if everything was okay, while the rest of you stayed here. I sat and waited like you, but just out of sight. I was *still* too afraid to let you know I followed you, and I was trying to figure out *what* was going on. I thought you would all be *really* mad at me.

“Then *you* came back Amanda, and said everything was okay, but there was a *cave-in* or something. You all said goodbye to Loki, and went through the door right *next* to me. In a couple minutes, the door where I was standing *flew* open and *Loki* walked *right* into me. Scared the *heck* out of both of us!

“He wanted to know what I was doing there, so I told him. I told him that I had been in the village when the fighting happened, saw you all leave for Thian’s place like that man had said. I told Loki I tried to find Thian’s house, showed up when the fighting was happening and hid. Then how I had seen the fights, followed you to Thian’s cabin, what happened there, and how I

followed you to the mountain ledge and into the vines, and, well, *how* I got to where we were standing.

“He was *really* upset at first, then calmed down and said that it was actually a *good* thing I did show up. He wanted me to tell you, that he was going to find his dad right away, then get to some people named *Josh* and *Samantha*, let *them* know what was happening, and that he had decided that he and his dad were going to *Jojo*’s. He wouldn’t *tell* me who *Jojo* is, or *where* he, uh, *she*, I mean *whatever* *Jojo* is... *was*.”

Tia laughs along with everyone but Amanda, who looks just as confused as Sadie.

“*Jojo*’s a *fishing* hole about two thousand miles from *my* place,” Thian says with a grin. “*Loki* and his dad go there every couple years, to spend some time together fishing, then go hunting for gems in the nearby hills. There’s a campground there, and some old *deserted* cabins deep in the woods, by some ancient *abandoned* mines. I bet they’re going to *hide* out there for a while, until they can figure out what else to do.”

“Well,” Sadie says with a smile, “*Loki* told me to let you know, that he was going to let *Josh* and *Samantha* know you got here okay, and *where* *Loki* and his dad were going. He then told me where *you* were going and how to get here. So, we said goodbye, and he went running to the alcove to go back home, and I... came *here*.”

“When I first *got* here, after another *really* interesting and scary ride, I found that I wasn’t even *tired* anymore. Really *weird*! I then found the place that had caved in. I flew up and into the cavern with the *big* scary face. I flew down and *looked* it over... I was really scared!

“I saw some footprints in the dirt, leading into the huge mouth. I couldn’t see any of you, and I couldn’t *hear* anything either. Finally, even though I was really scared, I went inside. I came to the writing and read the inscription on the tongue about the password.”

“Wait!” Thian says holding up both his hands. “You could *read* what was written on the tongue? And it was about a *password*?”

“Well, *yeah*,” Sadie says looking to the others with confusion. “It said, ‘The way is now shut. No entrance allowed but for the high priest and priestess. Speak the password now... or meet your doom. The way is now shut.’ But I guess you didn’t take the time to *read* it, because when I said the *usual* password, and walked into the back cavern and into the *big* chamber, the one with the *Pentagram*, you weren’t there.”

“You mean, you just *walked* across the tongue and into some *big* chamber with a *Pentagram*?” Thian asks completely bewildered. “And, it didn’t try to *eat* you like it did us?”

“Nooo,” Sadie says in a small voice. “Once I read the Theban and used the password, I just *walked* into the cavern.”

“*Theban*! Of *course*!” Tia says loudly.

“What’s Theban?” Amanda asks looking at Tia.

“It’s the old *alphabet* used by the witches in *several* realms. Actually, I think Theban was used in *your* realm Amanda, after the early witches first went there, *thousands* of years ago. *Loki* could tell you for sure, but I’m *pretty* sure it was. It was used instead of the common writing. Kind of like a *secret* language, known just to those practicing *witchcraft*. It was used to write down *spells*, incantations, *meeting* places, and stuff like that. Actually, it was used to write *anything* you didn’t want the common folk to understand.

“Also, since the writing was known to be that of *witches*, few ever *tried* to read it, from fear of having some *curse* which had been placed upon the writing, maybe kill *them*, or turning them into a *toad* or something. And *remember* when *Loki* was telling us about all those *horrible* witch

hunts on your realm? *That's* when Theban was *really* used there a lot I think, to write down *safe* places for the true *Wizitch* witches to meet, and plan how to escape."

"I *knew* I'd seen it before!" Thian says nodding. "I remember we read about it several years ago, in our *Obscure Ancient Languages* class. *Cool*."

"But Sadie," Tianna asks, "how in *two* moons, did you *find* us? We were *trapped* down in that pile of bones, in the muddy water? There's no *way* you could have *seen* us."

"Oh, um, I, well... I used a *transparency* spell actually. I'm not very *good* at it yet, but I *can* make an area about fifteen feet in diameter, *kind* of transparent, for about twenty to thirty feet or so, so I can see what's behind or inside something."

There are gasps from the others, Amanda looking at their stunned faces.

"You... you're... you're *Keptic* aren't you?" Thian says, his voice trembling as he tries to force down a swallow.

Sadie looks as frightened as a *trapped* animal about to be eaten alive. Tears well in her eyes, and are soon flowing down her little face as she begins to cry.

"What's... what's *Keptic* mean?" Amanda asks, looking at all the shocked faces, then to Sadie who is trembling, trying her best to stop crying.

"The Keptic," Tia says, her eyes still locked on the tiny girl, "are a *very* powerful and ancient race. They *genetically* possess some of the most *powerful* *Wizitch* of all the known realms. They are said to live for *thousands* of years, aging very slowly of course, if nothing *kills* them unnaturally.

"It once was said, that they were *not* to be trusted, and used their powerful *Wizitch* for their *own* end, at the expense of *everyone* and everything else. We read about them last year in the *Horrors of the Realms* series. But, it said that there were only a *handful* of Keptic still alive, after the Tullary war, after *dozens* of other realms got together and joined in the *Great Battle* of Zentour."

"The battle was to... *kill* all the Keptic?" Amanda gasps.

"No," Thian says shaking his head, still staring at Sadie. "The Keptic *had* joined with the other realms, to fight those on the Dark side of *Wizitch*, like Taldan and his gang. It was said to have been a *massive* slaughter, where *tens* of thousands of people and creatures lost their lives.

"The Keptic told the others that the stronghold of the Dark ones needed to be attacked at dawn. They convinced the other realms *precisely* where to attack, and *when*. When the attack took place, almost *everyone* was killed by the Dark ones. It had been a *trap* the Keptic had set, *along* with the Dark ones. The Keptic had been promised riches beyond belief. Their *betrayal* ended up in the *mass* murders of tens of *thousands* of those on the Light side... the *good* side of *Wizitch*.

"After the few thousand who *had* escaped returned to their realms, and the word spread about the *Keptic's* betrayal, the Keptic were declared the *enemy* of the Light... to be *hunted*, and killed on sight. The Keptic were sought out over the next few *thousand* years, throughout all the realms at that time, and from what we learned in class, only a *handful* were still said to be left alive of their *entire* race."

"Yeah," Tia says now looking from Sadie to Amanda, "but the hunt for them *ended* several hundred years ago, when many of the remaining Keptic *suddenly* appeared in another great battle, and *struck* down the Dark ones by the *thousands*, saving the Light from an *assured* slaughter. The remaining Keptic were declared *friends* of the Light, and all animosity was to end.

“But, the families of the *tens* of thousands who had been slaughtered, *still* carry anger and seek revenge even today. Kind of like the ancestors of *slavery* on your realm are still bitter, even though it’s been over a hundred years since slavery had been abolished.”

“But, what makes you think *Sadie* is Keptic?” Amanda asks confused.

“Because,” Tianna says trying to sit up against the cavern wall, “*only* the Keptic have the ability to *use* a transparency spell. And, after all, that’s the *only* way *Sadie could* have found us through *solid* stone.”

Sadie, still crying, gets to her feet and says through her tears, “I’m *sorry*. I can’t *help* who I am, or *where* I come from. I’m *not* a bad person... I’m a *good* person! I just want people to *like* me, and not be *afraid* of me and run away all the time when they find out who... *what* I am.

“I don’t have *any* friends. You don’t know what it’s *like* not to be liked when people find out what *race* you are. Tianna was the *first* person who was really nice to me, and, and even treated me like I was her *friend*, and she didn’t even know me. Nobody *ever* did that before. Then, she even wanted me to meet all of *you*, but there was no time.”

With her tiny lips quivering, Sadie says as she stands, turns and begins to walk away, tears *streaming* down her little face, “But now you *know* what race I’m from, and don’t *like* me anymore, *just* like everyone else!”

Sadie stops for a moment, then looking over her shoulder says, “You judge me for my *race*, and what my people have done in the past. You don’t even give *me* a chance to show you I’m not *like* them. I’m... I’m just *me*.”

Sadie turns and starts to run around the corner of the cavern they are in. The kids look to one another for the briefest of moments, when Tianna yells, “Sadie! Wait! You *are* my friend! Please, *don’t* go, come *back*!”

Amanda yells, “*Sadie*, we’re *all* your friends! We don’t *care* where you’re from, or *what* race you are! Come back!”

“Please... *stop* her!” Tianna gasps, bracing herself against the cavern wall as she clutches her side. “Please! She saved *all* of us, don’t let her go! She’s *just* a little kid!”

Amanda, Thian and Tia get to their feet and sprint off down the tunnel, calling after Sadie as they run, Thian limping badly, quickly falling behind.

They round a corner, then enter a large chamber which has a *huge* Pentagram on the floor. There, near the far side of the cavern, is Sadie, just mounting her broom. The kids all yell again for her to stop. Sadie hesitates for a moment, looking to them all as they came to a stop on this side of the cavern.

They can hear Sadie crying, as she hops into the air and begins to fly through a large open doorway.

Amanda yells, “Sadie! *You’re* judging us now, by how *you’ve* been treated before, *just* like people have judged you before getting to *know* you! *Don’t* make the same mistake! We *are* your friends, and we don’t *care* where you come from or *who* your people are! We *only* care about who *you* are!”

Sadie has disappeared through the doorway, and the kids are not sure she had heard them. After waiting a few moments, all looking to one another, they turn and begin to walk back to where Tianna is, along with all their stuff.

As they approach Tianna, Tianna calls, “Where’s *Sadie*? Why didn’t you *stop* her?”

“We *tried*,” Thian says as they walk up, Thian still peeling dried mud from his shirt and pants. “She just mounted her broom and went through a doorway and, well, we *lost* her.”

“But, she didn’t *do* anything wrong,” Tianna says now with tears in her eyes. “If it weren’t for *her*, we’d all be *dead* now. She *saved* us all. We don’t *care* what race she is, she’s our *friend*! I *really* like her, we *have* to go after her... please!”

“You’re right,” Amanda says reaching down and grabbing her broom, then stepping to her wand, which she notices is the one which had stayed lit. “Come *on* you guys, let’s see if we can *catch* her before she gets to the *transport* chamber!”

Thian and Tia grab their broom and wand while Amanda drops her backpack. Tianna is trying to get to her feet when a small voice comes from off to the side. Everyone spins to see Sadie standing there holding her broom.

Everyone just looks at Sadie for a moment, Sadie staring back at them. Tianna says, “Sadie. Please don’t go. We don’t *care* about your race or what people say! We care about *you*, as an individual.”

“I know,” Sadie says now walking slowly toward them. “I was just about to the tunnel leading to the transport chamber, when I *thought* about what Amanda had said... that *I* was now judging you, like *everyone’s* done to me. Not taking the *time* to get to know you, for who you all are, and not judging *you* on how others *like* you have treated me. I just heard what you all said about me now too.

“And, you were *really* coming after me, to *stop* me from leaving... weren’t you?”

Tianna has been struggling to get to her feet, and Tia and Thian now help her up.

“Yeah, we were,” Tianna says as she walks to Sadie. “Listen Sadie, all of *us* don’t have many friends either, and Amanda said she didn’t have *any* friends at all before she met us. And she’s from the *Earth* realm. She’s *human*, we’re *elves*, and Loki is a *dwarf*. Heck, we even have a friend that’s a *goblin*! We’ve been *picked* on and made fun of all our lives, so we *do* know what it’s like not to have friends, and be *judged* all the time for just the way we *look*. The way I see it, *you’re* no different from any of us.”

“You’re... *human*?” Sadie asks looking at Amanda with wonder. “But, I thought humans were *non* Wizitch. But, but I’ve seen you do some *really* amazing things. How?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Amanda says with a smile. “But Sadie, you’ve *got* to believe us, we *are* your friends... if you want to be *our* friend that is.”

“Oh yes... *please*, I’d *like* that!”

“Sadie,” Tia says and then looks to the others briefly, “uh, we really *do* want to be your friend, but, maybe your joining us *now* isn’t the best idea. We’re, uh, on kind of a *mission* of sorts, and it could get *really* dangerous. Maybe you should go back home for now. I’m sure your folks are worried *sick* about you by now. I mean, you’ve been gone a *long* time. We can meet up with you when we get back, uh, if you let us know how to *find* you that is.”

Sadie licks her lips and then in a small voice says, “I don’t *have* any parents. My dad was killed in one of the raids he was on just after I was born. My mom... well, uh, *she* was killed too. So, I’m *alone* really.”

“But, then, how did you get to the convention?” Thian asks. “I mean, you’re underage so, you need your parent’s permission, or a *guardian* or something.”

“Where I come from, if you don’t *have* any parents or other family that will take you in, you’re put into a *home* with lots of other kids who don’t have parents or families either. You have to stay there until you’re old enough to leave and be on your own.

“The Mosen of the house *knew* what race I was, and saw that I was pretty good at using a wand and other things. She is *really* mean and doesn’t *like* me at all, but thought I might be able to win a couple medals, which would bring *honor* to her and the house, which means she could

get more *money*. So, when she told me she had entered me into some competitions on *your* realm, I was really surprised, but *excited* too.

“She brought me to the convention, but wouldn’t let me do much or go anyplace on my own. The Mosen and I were in the village when the fighting started with all of you and those men. I was *still* trying to find Tianna, to say thanks for being so nice to me. But when people were getting *killed*, the Mosen took out her labyrinth, and set it for our realm. She then just *looked* at me for a second, pulled out her wand, then... then, instead of *taking* my hand before she actuated the transflight, she, well, kind of *sarled* at me, and said, ‘Good *luck* kid,’ then took two quick steps away from me and waved her wand.”

The kids all gasp.

“*What?*” Amanda asks looking confused. “I don’t understand. What’s a Mosen? And what do you mean, she set a *labyrinth* to your realm? And what’s, uh, a *transflight*?”

“Oh *Sadie*! That *horrible* woman! How could she *do* that to you?” Tianna says, then adds a long string of profanity.

“Do *what?*” Amanda asks loudly. “Will *somebody* please tell me what all this *means*?”

“It means that *Sadie* was *left* behind!” Thian says shaking his head. “And the *Mosen* went back to *her* realm! A Mosen is like the *head* mistress where we come from, or like that lady where *you* stayed until you were adopted.”

“*What?*” Amanda yells completely shocked. “She just... *left* you there? All *alone*? Why would she *do* that?”

“Because she doesn’t *like* me,” *Sadie* says looking at her feet. “She said that she doesn’t want... *my* kind around her, or in her house. I think that she thought *I* might be killed too with all the fighting going on, and she would just go back and tell them that I was killed along with all the others.”

“I just *can’t* believe anyone would do that!” Amanda says hotly. “But what does a *labyrinth* have to do with getting her home? Isn’t a labyrinth just a kind of *path* people walk on? You know, like representing the journey through life, to some *stupid* thing like enlightenment or something?”

“Well, *first* of all Amanda,” Tianna says snidely, “you’re showing your *ignorance* again. Just because *you* think something is *stupid*, doesn’t mean that it is. The labyrinth is *not* just some ancient symbol. It stands for *many* different things, and is *used* for many different things, on many realms.

“Where we come from, the labyrinth is actually a *messaging* and *transportation* device, which is also used on many *other* realms. You pull up the curves of what *you* think are the sides of the paths, and adjust them to vibrate at a *precise* frequency, when the energy from your wand *strikes* it. Dependent upon *how* you use your wand, you can make it vibrate so that it will transmit your *voice* from wherever you are, across *any* distance, even to the most *far* away realm, *right* to the labyrinth you want.

“Or, you can use a *different* wand movement, which will transport the *wearer* of the labyrinth to the intended destination. You can even use *huge* ones to transport equipment, lots of *people* at a time, and stuff like that.”

“Yeah,” Thian says as he runs his hands through his hair, chunks of dried mud falling to the cavern floor. “That’s *pretty* much how a lot of people travel really great distances even now days. The *transport* chambers, like the ones we used, are *really* ancient. There are of course, the really *modern* transport techniques, but the *labyrinth* is still used in many realms.”

"In fact," Tia says now brushing mud from her hair as well, "in *your* realm Amanda, the labyrinth has been around for *hundreds* of centuries. The thing is, those with *true* Wizitch, took the actual *working* labyrinths with them when they left. The ancient peoples of your realm had seen them, and have been drawing depictions of them, all *over* your realm. Over the ages, people in different parts of your realm have assigned different *meanings* as to what the labyrinth really was, and was used for.

"The *original* use of the labyrinths on earth, come from the ongoing battle of *good* against evil. The Labyrinth was carved, or *drawn* in the location where the *Cyrellians* defeated the Dorjans..."

"The... *who*?" Amanda asks.

"Never mind, that's a *whole* other story! Anyway, other peoples of your realm, decided that the symbol of the labyrinth, *must* be mystical, and came up with all *kinds* of other meanings.

"As for *modern* working labyrinths like the one Sadie's Mosen used, you *can* buy them back in our village, if you're of *age*, and have a *license* to use them. But only the *highest* of one's Order can get the long distance ones, and know how to use them correctly. Oh, and *transflight* is the term used when one transports from one place to another, *using* the labyrinth."

"Oh," Amanda says considering that for a moment. Then turning to Sadie, "So, you have no place to go then Sadie?"

"Noooo. So, can I come with all of you? I won't *cause* any trouble, honest."

The kids all look to Amanda.

Tianna then says softly, "Amanda, this *is* your quest, but we're all part of it because... well, we each have our reasons. Sadie, doesn't have any place to go, or anyone to look out for her, or anybody to *care* about her. So, if you'll let her come, *I'll* watch her... okay? She'll be *my* responsibility. Please, *don't* send her away all alone."

Everyone is *shocked* to hear the tenderness and almost pleading in Tianna's voice, her eyes now locked on Amanda's.

Amanda looks from one to another of her friend's faces, then to Sadie's tiny face. Sadie has her head down, but is looking up at Amanda through upturned blue eyes, with her lower lip out and quivering. Actually, she looks so *comical* Amanda has to stifle a laugh while saying, "Okay, she's *in*."

Sadie runs to Amanda and hugs her legs saying, "*Thank* you! *Thank* you Amanda! I *won't* get in the way, *really*!"

Amanda laughs saying, "Well, you may be thanking me *now*, but that may change soon. Did you bring a backpack?"

"A what?" Sadie asks as she lets go of Amanda and takes a step back.

"Backpack is *human* speak for travelers pack," Tianna says with a grin.

"Oh... no. We were just taking a walk in the village when the *fighting* started. I still had my *broom* since I just came from one of my competitions. And I've got my wand too, as you know, but that's all."

Tianna lets out a *groan* and grunt. Sadie turns and runs back to Tianna saying, "Don't worry Tianna, *I'll* take care of you."

Tianna *laughs* as she looks down at the tiny girl, who just reaches her waist, her laughing making her *cry* out in even more pain, along with half a grin, half a grimace.

The others laugh too.

"We need to get *Tianna* to a hospital, and soon," Tia says walking to her sister.

"So, where *do* we go from here?" Thian asks emptying his left boot of dried mud.

“Sadie,” Amanda asks, “you said you came in through a room that had a *Pentagram* on the floor? Was there *another* door in there too? Or some *other* way out of there, like a tunnel or something?”

“Yeah, there is another door on the left side of the room I think. I don’t remember seeing anything else in there though, but I didn’t stay to look around.”

“Well, it seems like that’s the only way we know of to go,” Thian says now stretching. “We might as well take a look and see where it leads.”

“Great, but *this* time Thian,” Tianna says as she leans against the wall, “if we find some writing on the floor and a *line*... do us *all* a favor, and don’t be *stupid* enough to step over it okay?”

Thian shoots a quick look at the others, turning a little red, then turns and begins walking toward the chamber where the Pentagram is. He says in almost a whisper, “Yeah, okay. I didn’t *mean* for anything to happen though you know. It was an *accident*.”

Everyone wipes as much dried mud as they can from their travelers packs, puts them on and adjusts them.

Tianna scrunches up her face and is about to say something, when Sadie takes Tianna’s hand and says, “Come on Tianna, *I’ll* show you where the room is. Can you walk okay?”

“I’m not *sure* really. It hurts quite a bit just standing. And all those *bites* and stings I got are really hurting too.”

Tia walks over and hands Tianna her broom. “Here, no sense in *walking* when you can fly. Can you mount up okay?”

“Yeah, I *think* so. I’ll try anyway.” Tianna takes her broom and winces as she steps over the bristles resting on the ground. She gives a little hop, giving a *cry* as she and the broom rise into the air, her feet just clearing the cavern floor.

“How is it? Any better?” Amanda asks looking concerned.

“Actually, it’s *much* better,” Tianna says with a sigh. “The backrest is really soft, so is the seat. *Thanks*, that was a good idea sis. Well, let’s see what kind of a *mess* Thian can get us into next.”

Thian, waiting for the others at the corner, opens his mouth to say something, but thinking better of it, he shuts it, then turns and walks off around the corner shaking the mud from his broom.

Both Tia and Amanda give Tianna dirty looks, then Sadie says, “Come *on* Tianna, I’ll show you where the door is.”

Sadie runs off with Tianna floating along beside her. Amanda turns to look at Tia for a second, both of them shaking their heads, then the two of them head off after the others.

They go through the ancient wooden door and find a *pathway* on the other side and begin following it.

The pathway curves several times both to the left and right, then begins to rise at about a twenty-five degree angle. After eight more minutes, they approach another *large* wooden door.

“Uh oh.” Thian says as he and Sadie come to a stop in front of it on a wide and relatively deep landing. It has *huge* metal straps crisscrossing its ancient wooden form.

Tia drifts up to Thian and Sadie who have arrived at the door first. “Uh, maybe before we *open* it, Sadie can use her, um, *skills*, to see what’s behind it. Can you *do* that Sadie?”

“Uh, well, I can *try*. Like I said, I’m just *starting* to learn how to do it.”

Sadie stands in front of the door and stares for a moment. “Oh. Hmm...”

“What Sadie? What do you see?” Tianna asks trying to see through the door herself.

“I’m not really *sure*, but it kind of looks like a small *cave* of some kind, and... I *think* I see some kind of dim *light*.”

“Light? *Really?*” Thian asks now looking at Tia, then back to Sadie. “Uh, is there anything, um, *moving* in there?”

“Not that I can see. I don’t see any *traps* either, but like I said, I’ve just started using this ability, so... right now, I just can’t see anything but a small *cave* that gets smaller... I *think*, then some dim light.”

“Okay Thian, *get* ‘er open and let’s see what we find,” Amanda says pointing her wand at the door. The others then do the same as Thian steps to the door.

“Orathian!”

The door clicks then pops open a little. Thian grabs the bronze ring and pulls it open enough to stick his head around.

“She’s *right*,” Thian says pulling the door fully open. “*Look*. It’s just a small cave about the size of my *bedroom* back home. And it gets smaller further in. I think that light’s, well, maybe *moonlight* or something. I think we *found* the way out!”

They all grin at each other, then adjusting their traveler’s packs and clutching at their brooms, make their way into the cave on the other side.

After reaching the far end of the cave, which has narrowed *considerably*, they do indeed find an opening which is about eleven feet in diameter.

“Let’s leave our packs here and take a look outside,” Thian says slipping his pack off and setting it against the cavern wall.

Everyone takes their pack off and sets them aside, Tia helping Tianna with hers.

“Well, let’s *take* a look and see what’s out there,” Thian says with half a grin.

As they each step through and to the side, they gasp. They find that they are now standing on a rock ledge, that has a *very* large and slanting overhang above them. The overhang would make the cave almost *impossible* to find, unless you actually *knew* right where it was.

They look in awe at the sight before them. Down in the moonlit valley below them, is a lush *forest* with what looks like an old *broken* down village, made up of only a few wooden buildings, half *hidden* among the dense trees, underbrush, *vines*, weeds and some flowers. There are lights coming from some of the buildings, and some dots of lights scattered around and about for a good distance, possibly houses.

“We’ve *found* it!” Amanda says excitedly. “We’ve *found Arcoma Village!*”

## Arcoma Village

[To TOC](#)

“Amanda, are you sure?” Tia asks bending to look beneath the low overhang to get a better look at the broken down village below them.

“Well, no. Not *really* I guess, but the *Journal* says that when you get to *The Realm of The Witches*, you’ll arrive at a place called, *Arcoma Village*. Here, let me show you.” Amanda goes back to her backpack and retrieves the old Journal she had found back on earth.

Flipping through it, with everyone next to her, she comes to the page she is looking for and says, “Here it is. *See*, here’s the picture of the village.”

Amanda turns the page around so everyone can see. Their eyes go wide at the *very* detailed, full page color drawing of the village.

“Wow, it’s so *real* looking,” Sadie says leaning in a little. “Is it a still or SAMP?”

“Is it a... *what*?” Thian asks looking puzzled.

“You know...” Sadie says furrowing her brows. “Is it really a still image, or is it a **Spell Actuated Motion Picture** using a *time* lapse sequence of some kind?”

Everyone just stands there and looks at Sadie like she is speaking a foreign language.

“In our ancient history classes, it said in ancient times, wizards, witches and others would cast a *SAMP* and use a universal spell to actuate it. Here, let me see if it is,” Sadie says pulling her wand and pointing it at the still image in the Journal. “*Almoto!*” A thin silver strand shoots from her wand and strikes the image. It *instantly* springs to life, and begins moving, like clicking the play button on an online movie. The image changes from a detailed color drawing, into a *full* motion color movie, but playing now in *spectacular*, perfectly detailed 3-D. There are people *flying* and walking around within the village.

“Wow! I never *knew* there was a spell to make a still image *move*,” Tianna says as she looks down at the page. “It’s like looking down on the *real* thing, but like, from a couple hundred feet *above* it, and about the same distance away from it. Look at all the *witches* walking around and looking in the windows! Looks like they’re *shopping* doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it does,” Tia says with a smile. “And look at the colorful *robes* everyone’s wearing... even matching *hats*! And look at *these* witches flying on those ancient brooms! Gosh, they haven’t made those in *hundreds* of years - I *think* anyway,” she says with a laugh.

They watch the short movie play through twice, then Amanda says, “And listen to what it says here under the picture...” she turns the Journal around to face her. “‘*Arcoma Village*, just North East of *Ulmorkeen*. After entering *Kelmar*, take the rock path to the right. Follow it to the lake. Turn and follow it back to the tree line, turn left and enter the *fifth* tree. Password is *Keltor*. You will arrive in the *third* tree behind the old pond. Use *this* tree and *same* password to return.’”

“Gosh, this must have been a really long time ago you know?” Thian says turning back to look at the overhang at the end of the cave. “I mean, just look at it *now*... if it *is* Arcoma. I mean, it *did* say something about entering someplace called *Kelmar*. Maybe *this* is *Kelmar*, and we need to do what it says to *get* to *Arcoma Village*.”

“No, this is, or *was*, *Arcoma Village*,” Amanda says flipping the Journal shut and putting it back into her backpack. “Over the next few pages, it talks about there being a fairly large city, about twenty-five miles Southwest of *Arcoma Village* called *Ulmorkeen*. It has a *lot* of weird stuff about what went on there, but, the Journal says you leave the transport and *arrive* at *Arcoma Village*. So, I’m *pretty* sure that this is either where it used to be, hundreds or *thousands* of years ago, or, this is actually the *same* village.”

“Well, what do you want to do Amanda?” Tia asks. “Tianna’s hurt pretty bad and we need to get her some help. Thian’s leg is really bothering him, and *my* arm could sure use some help too. And *all* of us were bitten and stung *dozens* of times. I don’t know what some of those things were, but the *venom* may kick in at any time, and many of the bites, stings, *cuts* and stuff are getting infected. But, do we go down there *now*, at night, or wait till *morning* and see what’s going on down there, and how many people there are first?”

Everyone looks to Amanda who is rather startled. She is still not used to anyone asking *her* opinion, or looking to *her* as to what they should do. She stammers, “Uh... well... maybe we should wait a *little* longer, and wait for more of the *lights* to go out. Then we can go down and look around a little. Maybe there’s, well, like a *clinic* or something we can find. But by the looks of it, I don’t think so. If we don’t find anything, we can always wake somebody up, or go back when it’s *light*, and get directions to a hospital.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Thian says turning to Tianna. “It’s just that Tianna has waited too long *now* you know? She *really* needs to get help, so does Tia.”

“We’ll be okay for a while longer,” Tianna says with half a smile.

They decide to sit and rest, then sneak down later and have a look around.

It has not been more than twenty minutes when Tia says, “What *is* that? Sounds like... *yelling*?”

The others hear it too and get to their feet, Thian helping Tianna up. They make their way quickly out and onto the ledge.

“Holy *smokes*...” Amanda says with eyes wide.

Looking down at the village, they count *twenty-one* black-cloaked riders on brooms, all firing bolts from their wands at the village. Windows are being *blown* out while small fires flair for a few moments, before quickly being extinguished.

“What in *two* moons is going on?” Tia asks no one in particular, her eyes darting all around.

“No idea,” Tianna says. “But those people in the village won’t have a *chance* without help. They’re being *surrounded*! They’re *trapped*, and it looks like some of the flyers are trying to *burn* them out!”

“Yeah, but *which* ones are the *bad* guys?” Sadie asks watching a door get blown away from one of the smaller buildings. “The ones on the *brooms*...or the ones in the *village*? I mean, the village looks *ancient*. Why would *anyone* actually want to live there? Unless they’ve done something *really* bad, and are hiding out... you *know*?”

“Yeah, well, maybe you’re *right*,” Amanda says, as she watches a rider on a broom get hit with a yellow bolt and fall from their broom. The rider drops down behind a tree and she cannot see them any longer.

“Hey! Look! The *back* building!” Tia cries holding her arm out.

Amanda looks to where Tia is pointing and sees several *children* running from a broken down building. In a flash, *three* flyers change formation and fire *yellow* bolts at the children. All five children are *struck* and fall to the ground. They lay motionless.

Amanda gives a cry of surprise. “Oh God! Those *poor* kids! I think those flyers might have... *killed* them! We’ve got to *help* them!” She feels a shock run through her as her vision changes. It is as though she is *sliding* into a long tunnel, which gets *darker* and darker as she slides, the light narrowing until it is just a pin point. A second later, her *hair* shoots straight up and slightly behind her.

“Oh *snippins*!” Thian says as his jaw drops. “Look at *Amanda*!”

The others turn around just in time to see Amanda running back inside the cave. Tianna says, shaking her head, "Great... *here* we go again."

Thian has to *dive* out of the way as Amanda *darts* past him on her broom. She arches down off the ledge and is gone.

"Help me get on my *broom*!" Tianna yells as she heads back inside. "I guess she's decided who the *bad* guys are. At least, I *hope* she's picked the right side!"

For a moment, Tia stands there looking at her sister, then licking her lips says, "Come on, let's go *help* her."

Tia helps Tianna back into the cave. Sadie has dashed in and has already mounted up.

Thian is still looking down at the village from the ledge when little Sadie yells, "*Out* of my way Thian!" and shoots past him and down out of sight.

Thian stands there for a moment, startled and watching the tiny girl disappear from sight, says in a whisper, "She's *five*... going into battle... and *I'm* just standing here?"

"*Move* Thian!" comes Tianna's strained voice. Thian *ducks* as Tianna narrowly misses him, shooting by with her wand held out in front of her.

Tia then flies past him and disappears as well. Thian spins, runs back in and mounts up, kicks off and shoots out into the cool night air. As he begins heading downward, he suddenly pulls to a hover and *freezes* for a moment. At least *seven* more riders have joined the other dark flyers.

There are flashes coming from *everywhere*. Many of the riders are now changing altitude as Amanda and Sadie have just arrived *blasting* away at them, scattering them in various directions. Tia and Tianna join in and are firing at the dark flyers from a good distance away to the right.

Thian is looking at what resembles a *swarm* of angry bees, flying *frantically* and erratically in all directions. Various colored bolts of *lightning* flashing like a multi-colored *web* of some kind.

Thian swallows hard at the sight of all the black robed flyers, firing who knows *what* kind of spells or curses. Coming out of his frozen shock, he quickly looks around. Thian sees Tianna engage two flyers and *blast* them off their brooms. He smiles, remembering that move was one she came up with herself. Taking a deep breath, Thian shoots down and into the battle yelling, "Here I *come* you *Blaggers*!"

Amanda approaches at nearly full speed as she watches three flyers dismount. They head quickly for three children who are clutching *tightly* to a very frightened woman, with a man lying *face* down on the ground at their feet.

Tia has *two* flyers after her now, since she had *blasted* one of their fellow flyers off their broom, using a *vomit* and hiccup spell.

Tianna *whips* around a building, coming face-to-face with two dark riders. She shoots *both* riders from their brooms before they know *she* is not one of them. Other flyers saw her fire and are now *hot* on her tail.

Sadie hits three with vomit, *hiccup*, and itching spells. She *cheers* as they fall from their brooms.

*Most* of the flyers that fall are cushioned by the *dense* foliage that seems to cover most everything. Once they hit the ground, bolts come through windows and doorways, striking the fallen bodies, whereupon they go limp and motionless.

Thian passes *closely* by a doorway as he hits a dismounted flyer, *just* as the robed man is about to fire on a man who has his *hands* up. Thian's spell hits the tall man *square* in the face when he had turned to look over his shoulder *right* at Thian. The bolt *flips* the man off his feet

and onto his back, where he begins *screaming* as his face begins to bubble, with the heaviest *triple* dose of a bursting *pus* spell Thian has ever used.

Thian *swerves* to a momentary stop, yelling back at the stunned man who still has his hands up, eyes *wide* with fright and confusion. “*Grab* his wand and *knock* him out! I don’t know *how* to do that yet! There are some kids on the *other* side of that building, *go* help them!” With that, Thian shoots off as twin *pinkish* bolts narrowly miss him.

Shooting into the air, Thian looks back over his shoulder to see the man who had his hands up, come out of shock, *dive* for the wand, roll onto his back and blast the *two* flyers that were after Thian, sending *both* of them spinning into the air then dropping hard.

Looking around quickly, Thian spots Amanda. She is *not* that hard to spot, since she has that silvery glow, like a *bubble*, around her again.

Amanda fires a quick volley of spells at *nine* flyers. Thian’s jaw drops as he sees *all* nine fall from their brooms, as their brooms spin down into the trees below, the fliers bodies *bounce* hard as they strike the ground. *None* of them are moving, and Thian *knows* those were no *pus*, vomit or *itching* spells she had used. Those people, are *dead*. He swallows hard as he watches Amanda speed away.

Amanda rises high into the air and slightly away from the buildings. She swerves to a halt for a moment, looking quickly at the battle. She spots *three* flyers closing in on Sadie, as Sadie tries to lose them by dropping *straight* down, and swoops off only a couple *feet* from the ground. She whips around the corner of a tall building into an alleyway, the robed flyers hot on her tail.

Amanda knows the flyers will *get* to Sadie before she can round the building and *into* the alleyway to help. Looking around, Amanda quickly spots an *orange* glow coming from the window of a building near the *center* of the alleyway. She *cranks* her throttle, and while diving quickly, heads *directly* at the window. Amanda levels off, then *crashes* right through the large glass window. As she darts through what appears to be a store of some kind, an older man and lady turn to see her shooting *right* at them. They scream and drop face down, just as Amanda *shoots* over their heads and right through the *opposite* window. Glass *shatters* sending shards flying everywhere.

Sadie had *just* passed by the window when Amanda had come crashing through. Amanda runs right into one of the robed flyers, *knocking* him right off his broom, sending him flying across the alleyway and through the side of the old *rotting* wooden building. He was *dead* on impact.

The other flyers, *clearly* startled and confused, break pursuit of Sadie and quickly rise to gather their wits. They never get the chance. Sadie had been looking over her shoulder and saw Amanda *strike* the one flyer. Sadie, seeing the robed flyers break off and begin to rise, takes advantage of the situation, and while shooting up after them, fires off several bolts. She hits *her* target, while Amanda had spun around and quickly took out the others.

Amanda and Sadie lock eyes for a brief moment, Sadie’s eyes wide at how *frightening* Amanda looks. Amanda turns quickly and flies off as though being chased by *demons*. Sadie swallows hard, then heads off down the alley, rising as she goes.

A bolt *zips* past Thian’s ear. Giving a cry, he glances over his shoulder to find four flyers are rapidly headed his way. “Oh *fizzlewicks*!” he says loudly, cranking his throttle and shooting off like a rocket. It is obvious *whoever* these flyers are, must be flying *very* ancient brooms, because they are *no* match for the ones he and his friends are on. He heads off into the nearby trees to lose them.

Sadie rises from the alleyway and slows to look around. She immediately sees seven flyers blasting *windows* from a nearby home, and watches as the front door is *blown* off its hinges and into the house. Accelerating quickly, she goes in *blasting*, heading directly into them. They turn and *scatter* as two of their brethren drop from their brooms. Sadie then soars up and over the house in a blur.

Tiny Sadie is now being approached from all sides. She is doing her best to stay away from them, doing some *excellent* flying, but knows she is in *real* trouble, and will soon be taken out. There is just *no* way she can see to get away. Then from somewhere above and in front of her, Amanda drops *straight* down firing bolts *quick* as a cat.

Sadie closes her eyes with a *grimace* as Amanda's bolts barely miss her on both sides of her body. When Sadie opens her eyes, Amanda is *gone*. Frantically, Sadie looks around her... *no* one there. She looks down and with a gasp, sees a *ring* of smoking bodies on the ground.

Many people from the village are rushing to the fallen, as some fire shots, not only to the *robed* flyers circling above, but at *Amanda* and her too. She yelps as a bolt *singes* her hair, then shoots off toward Tianna who looks like she could use some help.

Tia turns around after her spell misses its mark, to take another shot. She is a second too late. A *binding* spell hits her square in the chest. She is knocked off her broom and there is *nothing* she can do. Fortunately, she only falls fifteen feet into a *very* tall, *dense* green bush. Crashing through and to the edge of the bush, she hits the ground hard, knocking *most* of the wind out of her. Her momentum has rolled her out of the bush where she comes to rest on her back. She is *completely* bound and cannot move anything but her eyes.

Tia watches as Amanda is taking bolts from both the ground and from the flyers whizzing past her. Amanda is moving *faster* than Tia thought it was possible.

Nine *new* flyers have arrived and are gathered behind her and have formed an *arrowhead* maneuver. Four flyers positioned down each side, and *one* at the point. This gives the flyers a *clear* shot at Amanda, without worry of hitting their own. The leader has his wand raised high, the others doing their best to aim at the *erratically* flying Amanda. They are waiting for the leader to lower his wand and fire, which is the *signal* for everyone to fire. It is a very effective tactical maneuver, which *rarely* fails. Generally, there is *no* way to escape the arrowhead.

As Tia shifts her eyes, she watches as Amanda has *somehow* managed to flip the lever on her broom and is now shooting *backward* at near full throttle, without having *thrown* her off her broom! The leader is *stunned* by the suddenly rapid approach of this flyer streaking right at him... in *reverse*!

His face in terror, he *dives* just as Amanda would have crashed right into him, *still* flying in reverse. The robed man, not having dropped fast enough, was *clipped* in the head by Amanda's heal, *flipping* him off his broom backwards, where he falls like a *rock* to the hard ground far below.

Tia's frightened eyes follow Amanda as she zooms back between the other flyers, firing as she goes. One after the other fall from their broom as they try to turn to the outside to come around after her. She has *struck* them all. *Cheers* erupt from somewhere behind the bushes Tia is laying near.

Four *more* riders come in blasting at Amanda! She shoots forward with the four riders right behind her. All four flyers fire at once. Tia sees Amanda's silver bubble glow *brighter* as all the bolts strike it. Amanda shoots up in a backward loop, *spinning* like a top as she goes. Tia can see the heads of the flyers following her upward movement, then their heads snap back to look over their shoulders. Tia has never *seen* or even *heard* of a maneuver like the one Amanda is doing.

The robed flyers only had enough time to see Amanda fire off four quick *red* bolts. All four fall from their brooms, having *burst* into flames.

To Tia's horror, she thinks, "Those four were just *killed*! *Burned* to a crisp... while still *alive*!" Then the realization hit her, "Amanda must have *killed* the others she struck too! Amanda had read that book, and knows the most *evil* spells and curses ever created... and I... I just saw her *use* some! By the *moons*!"

Tia looks around and can see many flyers headed off to her left, away from the village. "There were a lot *more* of them around then we had first seen, *that's* for sure!" she thinks.

Amanda hovers for a moment, then turns to look in Tia's direction. Tia watches Amanda quickly fly down and disappear into the trees below her. In a few moments, Tia sees Amanda flying quickly around some trees in the distance. She comes to where Tia is laying and dismounts. Amanda's hair is *snapping* in the air like *thousands* of tiny whips.

"Her eyes... are they, *glowing*?" Tia thinks.

Amanda steps up to Tia, points her wand at her and fires a light lavender bolt, striking Tia square in the chest. Tia's *binding* spell is instantly broken.

Tia watches in surprise as Amanda's hair instantly drops to her shoulders, as though someone has *flipped* a switch and the wind has suddenly stopped. Amanda staggers back a couple steps, twists slightly as her eyes roll up into her head, her knees buckling, and *drops* to the ground.

Amanda lays motionless. Tia crawls to Amanda, reaches out and shakes her gently.

"Amanda? *Amanda*! Can you *hear* me? Are you alright?"

Amanda moans then flutters her eyes open. After a moment, her eyes clear and she sits bolt upright. "What... what *happened*?" Then looking around asks, "Where *are* we? How did we... *get* here?"

"Uh, I'll tell you later. But now, we need to *find* the others. Come *on*!"

As they get to their feet, Tia points to Amanda's broom and says, "Grab your broom. Where's.... oh, *there* it is." Tia walks over and grabs her broom, which is resting on the bush she had fallen into. She quickly mounts up.

As Amanda mounts her broom and kicks into a hover she asks, "Uh, Tia? Did I, um, *do* something again and I don't remember?"

"Yeah, you *did*. You were really *great* though! *Scary*... but *great*!"

"Did... did I *kill* anyone this time?" Amanda asks scared half to death, tears in her eyes.

Tia looks into Amanda's frightened eyes and says gently, "Come on, we need to find the others."

## Captured

[To TOC](#)

Amanda and Tia fly back into the tree line for cover, then back around to the left. Yelling can be heard and a few yellow bolts of lightning from wands can be seen in the distance through the trees and high bushes.

“Come on, that *could* be them!” Tia says as she shoots off low, her feet just a couple inches off the ground. Amanda is still confused and really scared, but shoots off after her.

“Move *again* kid an’ the *next* one’ll be a *killing* curse,” says a gruff male voice from the other side of some tall bushes, right in front of where Tia and Amanda have just come to a hover behind. They dismount and kneel behind the bush, listening.

“Bite my tree stump!” comes Tianna’s angry voice. “And if you *hurt* her, I’ll *hit* you with more than a *pus* and *vomit* spell, you *idiot*! We were the ones *helping* you!”

“I thinks yo’ ot’ ah *shoots* her again Delten. She hit yo’ *real* good with dat *pus* spell, and she set me *pants* on fire she did,” says another man’s high pitched jittery voice.

“Shuddup Cinobin and *pick* up that there tiny girl. Brat *hit* me with a vomit spell wit’ *almost* tore me *insides* out! If it weren’t fo’ yo’ an’ your counter spell, I’d still be *pukin*! Let’s take um in and call the others. Find out *why* they come here and was a *shoot’n* at us. An what the *heck* these kids *doin’* here? And where they *come* from anyhow? They ain’t from around *here* for sure! We knows *all* da kids here. And the Cormac’s ain’t *never* attacked us wit’ their kids. Don’ make no *sense* it don’!”

Amanda looks at Tia with a frightened expression and in whispers, “What are we gonna do? They must have hit *Tianna* and knocked out *Sadie*!”

“Don’t move a *muscle*, da *two* of ya!” says a woman’s voice from behind Amanda.

Tia whips her wand arm around and is hit by a yellow *stunning* spell, where upon she drops her wand and *keels* over onto her side, eyes wide and unmoving.

“Move and you’ll be *next* dearie. Drop the wand... *now*! Thaaat’s a good girl.” Then the woman yells, “Hey *Delten*! Cinobin! I got *two* more kids over here... both *girls*.”

The one called Cinobin comes running through the brush, trips over a vine in the dark and falls *flat* on his face. He scrambles up, *spitting* and wiping dirt from his tongue with both hands, which just *grinds* the dirt in deeper. He is *completely* filthy. He scurries forward with his wand glowing, eyes and hair *wild*.

“What yo’ *find* Beska? Ooooooh... lookie *there*! Two *more* little brats from the sky! Why yo’ think them *Cormac*’s brought their *brats* wit’ um?” he asks rubbing his hands together and blinking repeatedly.

“Don’ know. Let’s get um inside and *make* um talk. Un-stun dat one and *bring* her along. Okay dearie, *move* it and don’ *try* nothin’, got it?”

“I, I won’t,” Amanda stammers as Cinobin picks up her wand and Tia’s. He shoots a silver bolt at Tia, who instantly *gasps*, gulping in air as she rolls over and sits up, clearly frightened.

“Easy now! Don’ try nothin’ *stupid*,” Cinobin says with a dirty grin, showing several missing teeth. “On your feet! The *both* of yo’!”

As Amanda helps Tia to her feet, Beska points toward an old rundown building and nods. Tia and Amanda begin walking, Beska’s wand pointed at their backs, as Cinobin collects their brooms.

They can hear Cinobin muttering to himself, “Why them *kids* come along? What *they* doin’ in a fight? Ain’t from ‘rond *here* they ain’t! No, no, *ain’t* from ‘round here. What kind ‘o *brooms* is these? Never seen *nothin’* like these here afore.”

As Amanda and Tia make their way around the large bush that had blocked their view, they see the *huge* man called Delten holding both Tianna’s and Sadie’s wands and brooms. Tianna’s hands are bound behind her. Sadie is *just* regaining consciousness.

“Lookie what *we* gots Delten!” Cinobin says as they walk over to where Tianna is now kneeling beside Sadie, who is looking around very frightened.

“Is she alright?” Amanda asks worriedly as she and Tia step up to them.

“Yeah, *tree* stump here just knocked her out. But not before we hit *them* first.” Tianna gasps as Delten *kicks* her hard in the leg. Tia yells and begins to run forward, but is stopped by the woman, Beska. Seeing Tia’s worried look, Tianna quickly says, “I’m *okay* sis, not much worse than before I guess.”

“Uhhhh, so you is *sisters* is ya?” says the filthy, smelly lady called Beska. “And what about them *other* two? *Them* your sisters too?”

“No.” Amanda says as bravely as she can. “We’re their *friends*. We...”

There is a ruckus and rustling of brush as about a dozen people come running around the bushes with wands lit and wild faces.

“It’s *okay*! We’s *gots* um!” Delten calls. “Let’s take um inside and see who they is and what they doin’ here. Take the others we caught and *hold* um in the old jail. We’ll take care o’ them later. First though, we make these here kids *talk*. We can get more out o’ *them* I think, than the adults. Get *everyone* together, and let’s meet in the old theater. Oh yeah. I thinks we can get more out o’ these here *kids* than the others.... easy. *Go*!”

Several groups of people split off to go collect the fallen flyers, or those who had been hit on the ground, and take them to their jail, as well as pile up the bodies of those who were killed.

“Okay. *Move* it kids,” Delten hisses, “and if yo’ knows what’s *good* for ya, ya won’t cause no *trouble*. I said... *move*!”

Tianna gasps in pain as Tia helps her to her feet. Tianna then sees the blood flowing down Tia’s arm saying, “Sis, your shoulder’s *bleeding* again. How are you doing? Did they *hurt* you?”

“Oh, yeah, I guess it is,” Tia says, looking at the streaks of blood making their way down her dried mud and dirt-caked arm. “I’m *fine*. Really tired, and *hungry* too, but both Amanda and I are okay.”

Tianna then looks around and asks, “Where’s Th...”

Amanda cuts her off saying, “The *brooms*? They have *all* of them,” and gives Tianna a slight shake of her head, knowing that Tianna was going to ask, ‘Where’s Thian?’

Tianna looks confused and is just about to ask again when she looks to Tia, who narrows her eyes and gives the slightest perceptible shake of her head.

After a moment, Tianna says slowly, “Ohhhh, ah, *good*. Didn’t want to *lose* them you know.” Tianna looks to Sadie who has caught on, and also knows not to ask about Thian.

“Ain’t never *seen* no fly’n like you kids done. Ain’t never seen no *brooms* like these here before neither,” Delten says as he herds the kids into the large room in the old theater.

Amanda notices that there are lots of folding chairs inside, and a kind of *stage* at the far end. It looks like the theater is not *only* a theater, but is used as a town hall, and maybe a large dance floor at times, looking at all the scuff marks. Amanda and the others are taken to the stage, where it appears they are going to be put on *display* and interrogated.

Amanda, Tia, Tianna and Sadie are marched up onto the stage. Four folding chairs are passed up and onto the stage as well, and the kids are forced to sit. The large room begins to fill with more people, mostly adults, but lots of kids of varying ages too. Amanda counts twenty-three people, including Delten, Cinobin and Beska.

Many of the people who have taken their seats, are *excitedly* talking about how these kids had *shot* down some of the Cormacs, and even *saved* them from being hit themselves. Some talk about having seen what *looked* like someone in a kind of silver *bubble*, shoot several flyers, who *burst* into flames and dropped to the ground, *charred* to the bone. Some speculate that the kids may be *slaves* of the Cormac's, and thought this was their opportunity to get away. Others look more closely at the clothing the kids have on, commenting that they have never seen *anything* like them. Others are talking about the futuristic looking brooms these kids had ridden, saying they could *not* have been with the Cormacs. All this talk of course, raises more questions than give answers, and the room is abuzz with theories.

Several minutes pass before the ones who had gone to collect the fallen flyers, and either put them in jail, or had taken the bodies of the dead to the morgue, enter the theater and take their seats, telling those around them, that only *three* from the village had been killed, and *five* wounded, but not badly.

After everyone is seated, Delten holds up his arms and yells, "Now *hush* up everyone! *Quiet* I said! Hey! *Shut* your yaps!" The room slowly falls silent.

Delten, Cinobin and Beska are on stage with the kids. Beska stands behind the kids, while Cinobin quickly paces back and forth behind her, rubbing his hands together and talking to himself in a volume too low for any of the kids to understand.

Delten sets the brooms and wands to the side in a pile, then steps in front of the kids and asks loudly, "So, when did them *Cormacs* start using their *kids* in raids?"

"We're not *with* the Cormacs, you *idiot*!" Tianna snaps at him. "We were the ones fighting *against* them! Or were you too busy *hiding* to notice?"

Several in the room gasp, while others snicker.

"I see's em *fight* them Cormac's wif' me own *eyes* Delten!" a man near the back of the room yells out. "One of them their *gals* saved me and my *misses* she did. Be in the *morgue* if not for 'er I tells ya!"

"I seen 'em too," several others yell. Many are nodding, talking quickly amongst themselves about how the kids had shot down the robed flyers, and saved *them* or some member of their family.

"Yeah?" Delten snarls at Tianna, "Well then, if ya ain't *wit*' them Cormacs, then where *are* yo' from? And what yo' *doin*' here?"

"Where we're from and *what* we do, is *none* of your business!" Tianna growls.

Beska steps up behind Tianna and *smacks* her hard in the back of the head. "*Mind* your manners you little *brat*!" she says, stepping back.

"I'm gonna ask yo' *again*," Delten says now pounding one huge fist into his other open hand. "Where are yo' from... and *what* yo' doing here? Or do ya wan' me to *punch* yo' in the *ribs* some to get ya to talk?"

"Leave her alone!" Sadie yells, "She's really *hurt*! She needs *help*!"

"Yeah, we think she has some *broken* or cracked ribs," Amanda says quickly. "Maybe even *bruised* ribs. She may have *internal* bleeding too. Please, we just *came* here to get her some help, and Tia's *arm* is really hurt bad and it's *bleeding* too! We don't *know* any, uh, *Cormacs*! We just showed up here and saw the fighting. We didn't know *who* the good guys were, until we saw

some of the flyers *shoot* some kids. That's when we came to help. Please! You've *got* believe me! We just came to get some *help*. Tianna's *really* hurt! Can't you *see* that? Please!"

A woman's voice who had just come through the door in the back of the room, rises above the murmuring. "*Delten*, let me have a look at them for Seema's sake, they're just *kids* after all, and a lot of us *saw* them help fight the Cormacs. I really don't think they *are* with the Cormacs." She walks forward, says something to a young girl who must be fifteen or sixteen, who nods quickly, then looks at Amanda and the others with what is clearly curiosity and excitement in her sparkling eyes, as she takes a seat.

Everyone in the room watches the woman make her way to the stage, climb the old creaking wooden steps, then kneel beside the bound Tianna. The woman is the *only* one in the place, other than the *girl* she had spoken with, who looks *clean*. Her clothing is tattered, but clean. Her skin is clean and her hair clean and shiny. She has a kind and friendly face, and when she speaks, it is in a warm soft tone. "Hi. My name's Rayolin. I'm not going to hurt you... or, at least not *intentionally* anyway. My I ask if Tianna is your real name?"

Tianna, still angry, looks intently at her for a few moments. The woman's kind eyes never leaving Tianna's, as she maintains her warm smile. Tianna licks her dried muddy lips, looks around the crowded room then says, "Yeah. It is."

"*Wha'd* she say?" yells a voice from the crowd.

"Said 'er *name's* Tianna. Now *shut* up till Rayolin here checks 'er out!" Delten yells back.

"Where are you and your friends from Tianna?" Rayolin asks softly as she gently touches Tianna's side, making Tianna yelp.

"Sorry dear... *where* did you say you were from?" she asks again.

Tianna has just opened her mouth to say something, when there is a loud knock on the back door which startles everyone. The entire room goes quiet, turning as one, looking blankly at the closed door at the back of the building, which is the *only* door to the building.

"Who in *blazes* is that, an' why they *nockin*?" Delten asks inquisitively. "Well? *Somebody* get the dang *door*!"

A young boy at the back of the room jumps up, steps over and opens the door. From the other side, everyone can see a young boy step through, who is *very* dirty with what appears to be dried *mud* on his clothing, and in his *matted* hair, like the other captured kids have. He is holding a *filthy* broom with caked mud flaking off of it, like the captured kids had been found with, but *this* one looks as though it may have been in a *fire* as well.

"Oh... *thank* you very much," Thian says as he limps into the room full of shocked onlookers, who now get to their feet pulling their wands.

"Hello," Thian says to one tall man. "*Nice* to see you," he says passing a frightened lady. "*Hi* there, nice *evening* isn't it?" Thian says with a huge smile as he nods to people on either side of him, *ignoring* the wands pointed at him as he simply continues limping slowly down the center isle toward the stage.

"Ah! *There* you four are!" Thian motions with his broom to the kids on stage, who look at Thian *completely* dumbstruck. "Thought I *lost* you there for a bit, in that little *spat* we got into with those *nasty* black robed flyers. See none of you got *killed* in the battle. And it looks like none of you have *died* from the *plague* yet either... at least not *yet* anyway. Well, that's at least *something* isn't it?"

Everyone in the large room is focused on the filthy boy, limping badly, making his way *very* slowly toward the stage.

“Good thing we *escaped* that dreadful *hospital* though, *that’s* for sure!” Thian says nodding to a woman whose mouth is wide open with a stunned expression on her face. “Those cold *cells* they had us in were *horrible*, and just because we’re *highly* contagious too. Well, *that* and because a couple nurses and doctors *died* trying to save us, ‘cause *they* caught the plague too. This is *much* nicer I’d say.”

Thian stops for a moment, and while turning in a *slow*, full circle, pointing to the people in the room with a confused expression, says, “Although, I can’t for the *life* of me figure out why all these *people* would want to be around us... when we are so *contagious*! Do *they* all have the plague *too*?”

There are gasps and *stunned* murmurs around the room, as several people simply *fall* from their chairs, as Thian reaches out to shake hands with some of them. Others jump up and while *knocking* those around them down, make their way to stand back against the walls, wands held out toward Thian, shaking so hard they can *hardly* hold onto them.

“The *plague*! They got the *plague*!” Cinobin yells, his eyes *popping* and head moving first to Thian, then to the kids on stage near him. “Look at ‘es *face* an ‘es *arms*! *Snippel* snaps! Look at them there *girls* on da stage too! Them got them *bumps* all o’er ‘em too! See? His are *really* red and bright. I think... I think I sees some *poppin*’ pus too! *Run* fur it! *Run* fur yo’ *lives*! Them got’s the *plague*!”

Chairs instantly begin to topple. People are trampling others, trying to get back out of the way as quickly as they can. The place fills with *screams* as Thian continues to reach out to those he is passing.

“Stop! Stop yo’ dang *fools*!” Delten yells. He then watches Thian hobble up the steps to the stage, grimacing with each step. Once he reaches and steps onto the platform, Thian appears to wipe his mouth, then stops. Suddenly, Thian begins to *shake* like someone is *shaking* him by the shoulders. He is making strangled-like *gurgling* sounds. With eyes bulging, he begins *coughing*. Bending forward, he *spits* into his hand. When he holds it up to look at it, there is a *thick* mass of what looks like a *gooey* wet glob of *blood*, and what looks like blood now *running* from his mouth, down his chin, then *dripping* onto the stage.

The kids gasp, looking *horrified*, except Tianna, who Amanda notices has a faint look of amusement on her face, before her expression sobers and she says in a frightened voice, “Oh Thian, I’m *soooo* sorry! It looks like you’re in the *advanced* stages of the... *Morlango* plague and, and *that* means...”

“What?” Delten asks as he and Beska take several frightened steps back. “What does that mean? What’s the... *Morlango* plague? I ain’t never *heard* of it!”

“It means,” Tianna continues, looking very frightened, then glances to Amanda, Tia and Sadie, “our friend Thian, is now at the *highest* level of contagion there is. And you know how *deadly* the *Morlango* plague is! Anyone who *touches* him, or is near him and *breathes* the same air he does... or *any* of us actually, since we’re *all* contagious, could *catch* the plague easily... break out in these *horrible* and *painful* pus popping sores like *we* all have and... *die*!”

“You’ll get these *hideous* red bumps all over you just like we have. And they *really* hurt something *awful* on your private parts, let me *tell* you! The doctors said that it’s *much* worse for adults,” she turns her head to look at Delten, “especially *men*! The doctors said something about... their lower *parts* falling off or something... I don’t really know what that *means* though, being just a kid.”

There are cries of *fright* from the crowd, as more chairs are overturned. Everyone is pressing up against the walls, away from where Thian has walked, and all the kids are now on stage. Most of the village *men* are looking down their bodies, with their eyes *bulging*.

Amanda stifles a *laugh* and does her best not to smile. Tia lets out just a little laugh, but turns it quickly into a couple coughs, which sound like she is trying to cough up a *fur* ball. Sadie just sits there for a moment, looking as *scared* as the other people in the room, then catches Amanda's quick wink.

Delten yells, "Wha', *wha'* we needs to do so's not to *catch* it? Some of us *already* touched yo'! And we *all's* breathin' the same air in here!"

Tianna continues. "Anyone who *touched* us, or is *in* this room, *breathing* the same air we are, needs to get in a tub of *hot* water. The *hotter* the better. As *hot* as you can stand it. At least that's what the doctors told the *nurses* that had been with us... though some of *them* died anyway.

"Then you need to wash with *lots* of soap, and *scrub* your skin with *sand* or something *really* rough... till it's *raw*. Then you need to toss in *lots* and lots of *salt*, till it *burns* really bad in the raw skin, you know? Like, till you can't *stand* the burning anymore. If you scrub and soak *looooong* enough, and *hard* enough, and do it... well, in *time*... you *might* make it. But, if you *wait*..." her voice trails off as she shakes her head slowly looking very sad, then turns and nods to where Thian is standing.

Thian turns from looking at the kids, to look out into the crowd. His eyes bulging, he makes a very odd scrunched up face, with one eye almost closed and starts to gag.

Everyone in the room turns to look at Thian, whose entire body seems to be *covered* in bright red bumps where the mud has fallen off, and who looks to have a *fresh* stream of blood coming from his mouth, running down his chin, dripping onto the stage. Thian then holds up his hand with the thick *glob* in it.

Beska *screams* and flies off the stage, running for all she is worth, down the center isle and out the door. Cinobin bolts off the stage right behind her yelling, "We're *all* gonna die! We're *all* gonna die! It's the *plague*! The *plague*! We're all gonna *die* we is!" He falls twice before reaching the door. Just reaching the doorway, he is bumped to the side by a *very* round woman running through the doorway herself. He spins hard to the side and runs *face* first into the doorjamb, knocking himself out.

Everyone in the room begins screaming and darting for the one small door. Chairs are overturned and people are falling over them in mass. Many are being *trampled*, as they are thrown to the floor or fall, as others try to bully their way out and *literally* run right over the fallen.

Delten stands rooted in place, completely *stunned* watching the chaos before him. For several moments he looks almost as frightened as the rest of the villagers. He does not know whether *he* should run or not.

Thian then turns and walks to stand in front of Delten saying, "*Hi*. My name's Thian, pleased to *meet* you, Mr., uh, *what's* your name again?" Thian extends his bloody hand with the slimy *lump* in it to shake Delten's.

Delten, surprised by Thian's now calm demeanor, glances down at Thian's extended hand and sees the *thick* red wad slide down Thian's palm and drop with a *splat* to the stage floor. Delten's wide eyes briefly scan Thian's face and arms, and notice they are *full* of very large, *bright* reddish welts, some of them having *burst* open, oozing a *yellowish* pus.

Thian then coughs hard, *spraying* Delten square in the face with splotches of red flecks.

Delten staggers back, quickly wiping his face. He looks at his hand, which is now *smeared* with red streaks. His eyes fly *wide* as he again looks at the blood running down Thian's chin, as Thian's face begins to distort and his *eyes* roll back. Delten *bolts* off the stage running for the door. His huge boots *thundering* on the old wooden floorboards, sending up clouds of swirling dust as he runs.

He reaches the door just as Cinobin has regained consciousness, and is just now standing, steadying himself in the doorway. Delten runs *right* into him, sending Cinobin *flying* through the doorway, landing flat on his face. Delten, in a *complete* panic, continues to run right over him, leaving a *large*, clear, *muddy* footprint square in the center of Cinobin's back.

## Rayolin and Anastasia

[To TOC](#)

When the room is empty and the door has been slammed shut by a frightened Cinobin, Rayolin, who has not left Tianna's side, *bursts* into laughter, startling all the kids. "I haven't seen *that* much action around here in *years!*" she says reaching up to wipe a tear from her cheek. "The *Morlango* plague? Where did you come up with *that* one Tianna?"

"What? Uh, what do you *mean?*" Tianna says trying to look innocent.

"Listen, it's okay, *really,*" Rayolin says with a laugh as she unties Tianna's hands. Rayolin gets to her feet and walks to Thian, who is now smiling with his face looking almost normal... well, as normal as it *could* under the circumstances. Holding her hand out she says, "I'm Rayolin. It's nice to *meet* you Thian."

Thian holds out his bloody hand looking surprised.

Rayolin looks at his hand and asks, "*Raspberry...* I presume? But, what did you *mix* it with?"

Thian stands there for a moment, looking like a young *Krispet* caught in wandlight, eating out of someone's trash can. He stammers, "Oh, uh, *well*, I..."

"A little dry *grass* I bet," Tianna says with a laugh. "At least, that's the way I did it to *him* when we were little."

Rayolin laughs as she shakes Thian's hand. Then, wiping her hand on her skirt, she says, "That was *really* great! *Well* done! I've been *trying* to get all of them to take a bath for *years.*" She laughs hard again, and wiping tears from her eyes says, "I can just *picture* them all filling their tubs, and *ripping* off their clothing. I bet they really *do* rub their skin raw and use salt. Ouch! Nice *touch* though Tianna. Listen, you kids can tell me more later if you like."

Turning to Tianna and speaking more seriously, Rayolin says, "But right now, I need to get you and the others to my home, and tend to your wounds. Look there," she says pointing to the side. "Those *idiots* left your *wands* and brooms over there. Really *bright* people we've got here in the village! Would you kids get them please, and hand Tianna her wand and broom so she can fly over to my place?"

"You... you're going to let us *have* our wands? And our *brooms* back?" Tia asks surprised. "Aren't you afraid we'll escape, or, *shoot* you or something?"

"*Escape* dear? Where would you escape... *to?* I'm not sure where you're *from* of course. Certainly not from any place around here, by the looks of your clothing and those brooms. But, it doesn't appear to me, that you were any better off from wherever you have come *from*, than where you are now. I really don't know *where* you would go, but if you really want to leave, you better leave now, before *Delten* finds out you've tricked the entire village. He will *not* be happy when he finds out, and he and some others, can get *plenty* mean."

"You may leave if you like, but I do believe that Tianna *does* have at least a couple cracked, and possibly *bruised* ribs, which are *really* painful and can take a *very* long time to heal... unless treated by a *highly* qualified medical professional, which I just *happen* to be. Your choice, but..."

Tia turns to look at Tianna, then at Amanda.

Amanda hesitates for just a moment. Then, licking her lips, steps forward saying, "We'll *stay*. Thank you. Tianna is the most injured. But Tia's arm is hurt pretty bad too. And Thian's leg is *infected* I think. Sadie and I are okay though. My *name* is Amanda. We would really appreciate your helping us, if it's not too much trouble."

"Trouble? My *dear* young lady, it would be my *pleasure* to have the company of those who do not speak like uneducated *hill* people... which, by the way, *most* of them in the village *are* you

know. I look forward to having a *decent* and civil conversation for once. Now, help Tianna get mounted up, grab your things, and let's get her to my place. *Quickly* now!"

They all mount and kick off, then drift behind Rayolin to the door. Rayolin slowly opens the door, then steps through taking a quick look around. With a nod, she walks on. They all follow her nervously out into the cool night air. Everyone looks around for any sign of the villagers, or any more *flyers* who may have decided to come back for another strike. There is no one in sight.

They have not gone far when they hear *cries* of what is clearly pain, coming from several areas around the village.

Rayolin laughs. "Well, it sounds like *some* of the villagers have already scrubbed themselves *raw*, and sounds as though some may have just added a bit of *salt*."

Everyone laughs.

Rayolin leads them down a dirt pathway that winds between some very beautiful trees, until they reach a clearing where all the kids stop flying and simply stare.

Rayolin, sensing they have stopped behind her, turns to see what is wrong.

"What *is* it kids?" Rayolin asks as a young girl steps out of the house they are facing.

"Uh... *nothing*," Thian says, his eyes roaming the beautiful house in front of them.

"It's, uh, well..." Amanda says, looking at the wonderful flowerbed that surrounds the house. "Your home is *really* beautiful, but the *other* buildings are... uh..."

"*Not* so beautiful?" Rayolin laughs as the young girl steps up beside her with a smile.

"Well, *yeah*, actually," Amanda says with a laugh as well.

"*Thank* you," Rayolin says turning to look at her home and garden, then back to the kids. "There *are* a few of us who like nice things, and try our best to take care of the few things we have. Oh! This is my *daughter*, Anastasia."

"*Hi*. You *weren't* with the Cormacs, *were* you? No... I *knew* you *weren't*. You're not from around *here* either are you?" Anastasia asks excitedly. "You have *clothing* I've never seen, and those *brooms* aren't like anything I've ever seen either."

"Okay hon, there will be time for all that later, if the kids wish to share, but first, let's get them inside before *Delten* or some of the others come calling. If we keep you kids inside for a few weeks, while I tend to Tianna, Anastasia and I will *keep* up the ruse of your having the... *what* was it dear? The *Morlango* plague?"

Tianna laughs then grasps her side with a wince. "Yeah, well, as you know being a *healer*, there's no such plague. At least I don't *think* there is. I just *made* it up when I figured out what Thian was doing."

They all laugh and head into the home of Rayolin and Anastasia.

As they enter, Sadie asks, "Who *are* the Cormacs anyway? And what will you do with the ones that were hit with spells and stuff that *are* still alive?"

"Oh, the Cormacs is a term used here, to denote *any* group of people who come to take *whatever* information we have on the treasure, or anything *else* they can steal," Rayolin says as she leads the kids into a very lovely living room. She then leads them into a dining area off the kitchen, where she motions for them to sit. "Of course, there *is* no treasure. People have been searching this area for *centuries*. It's just a *myth* after all. But once in a while, rumors get started about someone here in the village, finding *gold*, silver or *precious* gems from some supposedly lost treasure. Then, a group of *thugs* get together and come looking for trouble, and they generally come in *blasting*."

"But, why don't they just *ask* if you know anything?" Thian asks helping Tianna to a chair at the table.

“They don’t think we’ll tell them the truth,” Anastasia says, peeking out from the kitchen, where she and Rayolin are beginning to prepare dinner for themselves and their new guests.

“They think that if they come in *blasting* away and take over the village, they can *tear* it down if they have to, to find... *whatever*. Lots of times, they capture people from the village, take them away and *torture* them, trying to get the information. Many have been *killed*. Others, we never *hear* of again.

“Those Cormacs can’t be very *bright* though. I mean, *honestly*, if we *had* the treasure, *who* would want to stay *here*? And if we had a *map* of where to find the treasure, don’t you *think* we would have used it? And as to the ones we and you shot down? Delten and his *side* kicks, Cinobin and Beska, who think they *run* the place, will bundle them all together and use our big *homing* labyrinth, to send each of them back where they first *started* from. Once he gets their *coordinates* that is.”

“Um.... so... uh, some people get *killed* in the raids then?” Amanda asks looking very frightened, since Tia had not said whether Amanda had killed some people or not, and she does not remember a thing.

“Well, *yeah*. Most *every* time they come actually,” Anastasia says sadly. “That’s how my dad got killed when I was seven. Mom and I don’t use any kind of *killing* curses though,” Anastasia says as she and Rayolin look steadily at Amanda for a long moment. “And, well, I don’t *know* how to use any of those anyway. But evidently, *you* do.”

Amanda turns to look at the other kids, who look down or look away.

Anastasia continues. “Mom and I believe that many of those people that come here, are just *desperate* and down on their luck. As if *we* aren’t,” she says looking very sad.

“Mom and I, and most of the other villagers, only use *stunning* spells, binding spells, *vomit*, itching and *pus* popping spells, and *things* like that. But even then, *sometimes* people will fall from their brooms and break their necks or something.

“*Delten* and some others though, *do* use killing curses sometimes, but *only* when they feel they need to. No one here wants to be *arrested* for killing somebody you know. The thing is, those *Cormacs* don’t care *what* kinds of spells or curses they use. They’ve killed *lots* of the villagers over the years. That’s why the village is like it is. Most of the people that come to live here, spend *all* their days looking for the treasure, and don’t tend to the village itself. Besides, when the Cormacs come, they’ve *burned* down the village lots of times over the centuries.

“By the way, this is *Arcoma Village*, in case you were wondering where you were - just not the *original* village of course. It’s been rebuilt *hundreds* of times from what I’ve read.”

After checking that everything is started in the kitchen, Rayolin comes in saying, “There is a tub in the back room. I don’t suppose *any* of you would be interested in taking a nice hot *bath* would you?”

“*Me* first!” Tia yells holding up her hand. “I can’t *wait* to get all this mud and *gunk* off! But, uh, I noticed a waterfall on the mountain we... I mean, on a *mountain* I saw when we joined the fight. We’re *all* a real mess. Do you think it would be alright if we, uh, flew up and *rode* through the falls first? To get the really *heavy* stuff off at least? We won’t try to get away or anything. I just don’t want to get everything *here* filthy and clog up your tub.”

“That’s a *great* idea!” Amanda says with a smile. “But I’m *still* looking forward to a *nice* hot bath... with *soap*! These darn bumps hurt and *itch* at the same time. They’re driving me *crazy*! So... it’s okay to get them *wet* then?”

Rayolin says with a laugh, “Well dear, *I’d* have to clean them up to get a good look at them anyway, so, better *you* clean them than me.”

Everyone laughs along with her, then Rayolin says, "Well, honestly, you can all fly over if you want." She then looks Thian up and down, focusing on his hair which seems to have some dried *moss* in it, and says with a laugh, "You *are* all a mess, *aren't* you! And, well... what can I say about the *smell*?" She laughs hard again, the others joining in as Thian turns a light shade of dirty pink, then laughs too.

"Well, *alright* then. Anastasia, show them the *smaller* falls though would you? You kids can still ride through those falls if you like, but there is a *huge* pool of water at its base. A *great* place for... well, for a *pre-bath* I guess you might call it. It's out of sight from the village, so I don't think you'll have to worry about being seen."

They all agree, mount up and head off through a side door to get somewhat clean.

Other than Tianna, who does not think she can take the *blast* of the falling water, they ride through the falls several times. Tianna watches as the others all laugh as quietly as they can, chasing each other around and darting through the falls. Afterwards, they all wade into the wonderful moonlit pool at the falls base. They laugh as they play around with their new friend Anastasia. Tia and Amanda help Tianna wash off, and help get the mud and gunk from her beautiful, usually long blond hair. The water *is* chilly, but they just do not care.

When they are about to mount up, *completely* soaked and dripping, Sadie asks, "Don't you want to *dry* off first?"

"What?" Thian says as he grabs his broom, his wet hair hanging down in his face.

Sadie, who is standing next to the *very* tall Anastasia, draws her wand, points it at Thian, whose eyes grow wide, and gives a *flick* while saying, "Sosteacia Preta!"

Instantly, Thian is *completely* dry - clothing, *hair*, body, boots... *everything*. Everyone has their mouths open and eyes bulging, as they watch the steam rising from Thian, which quickly dissipates in the cool night air.

Thian holds out his arms, looking them over, then down his body. He touches his dry hair and smiles, "*Cool!* I'm nice and *toasty* too." Everyone howls as Thian does a little *happy* dance with his index fingers pointing in the air.

"How... *how* did you do that?" Anastasia asks looking very impressed.

Sadie smiles, and seeing the awe on the others faces as well says, "Oh, uh, it's *just* something I learned from a *really* powerful witch when I was little."

Anastasia laughs saying, "When you were *little* huh. How old *are* you anyway?"

"Fiiiiive. But we learn *lots* of stuff when we're really young where I come from."

"Yeah? Well, where *are* you from anyway," Anastasia asks Sadie, then looks to the others.

"I... I *think* we really need to be getting back," Amanda says as she sees an expression of fear cross Sadie's face. "Rayolin will be wondering if we took *off* or something. And besides, I want that *hot* bath with some *soap*! I'm tired of smelling like... uh, well, I'm just tired of *smelling* like I do."

They all laugh, Tianna grimacing, doing her best not to laugh, then Tianna says, "Do *me* now Sadie, okay?"

Sadie smiles and with a *flourish*, dries Tianna, then each of the others. Sadie enjoys everyone thinking she is *really* special, and can do things that none of *them* can. Of course, Sadie was *never* taught how to do this by a *great* and powerful witch. Everyone in her class at school had learned it at the same time. Where she *originally* comes from, it is a *simple* spell, and *everyone* learns how to do this by the time they are *three*.

They return to the house and Rayolin is *floored* that they are completely dry. Anastasia tells her how Sadie had used some *unknown* Wizitch, and had dried each of them off before they came back.

"I'd really like to learn *that*!" Rayolin says with a laugh. "Can you show me how to do it after one of you takes a bath?"

The grin on Sadie's face slides away, and she begins to bite her lip as she looks to the others.

"Oh, I'm *sorry*, I don't mean to impose," Rayolin says noticing the expression on Sadie's face.

"Oh, *no*, it's okay I guess. It's just that, I've never taught *anybody* anything before. Usually, everyone *knows* everything I do, and a lot more. But, *yeah*, okay, I'll try to show *all* of you if you want."

Everyone is thrilled and the grin returns to Sadie's face as she giggles.

"Well, if you don't mind," Tia says with a smile turning to Rayolin. "I'd *really* like that hot bath now, if it's still okay."

"Of course dear," Rayolin says with a smile. "I've already put dinner on hold while you all get cleaned up. Why don't the rest of us just sit and chat for a bit?"

When Tia is finished with her bath, she calls Tianna, Amanda, Sadie, Rayolin and Anastasia into the little back room, so Sadie can teach all of them how to use the drying spell. Sadie is the *center* of attention and just *loves* it as she tells everyone how the *powerful* witch who taught her, had seen her doing *other* spells, and was *so* impressed, she invited Sadie to her *home*, and gave her *private* lessons. She had even taught her things she was *sworn* to secrecy, *never* to show anyone else... *ever*!

Everyone tried the drying spell on each other as each got out of their tub. They had two tries - one on their *clothing* and one on somebody else's naked *body*, to get the hang of it. Since their clothing had been pretty well washed off in the pool under the falls, they each washed their clothes in the tub before stepping out, to finish washing them, and to make them *smell* a little better too.

Both Rayolin and Anastasia *gasp*ed when they saw Amanda's necklace for the first time.

"For the love of *Seema*! Would you look at *that*! It's *gorgeous*!" Rayolin exclaims when she first sees the necklace.

Amanda quickly says, "Oh, uh, *thanks*. It's not *real* of course. No little *kid* would have a necklace with *real* gems and stuff. It's a, um, *replica* of some famous necklace. I don't remember what it was called. But, I really like it though." Amanda then turns to her stunned friends, grabs her wand and dries her clothing. Tia uses her wand to dry Amanda off, all of them laughing as Amanda's *long* hair sends up strands of steam.

Thian took his bath last. He, like the others, is thrilled to get the dried mud and other gook off, *especially* from his hair. The warm bath feels great, but *stings* a little on his injured leg, the bites, stings and other cuts and scrapes. The *heaps* of bubbles are fun to play around with, and the soap smells like his *flower* garden did back home.

"Home," he thinks as the smile fades from his face. "I *have* no home now," he whispers. "I have *nothing* at all now but my friends."

Thian steps from the bath onto the bath mat, pulling his clothing from the tub and wrings them out. He spreads the clothing out on the wide marble changing area, then picks up his wand.

Sadie had shown him how to use the drying spell on wet clothing, but since he was a boy, he would have to try the drying spell on *himself* too if he wanted to try.

Looking at his clothes, he smiles, the thought of his lost home and possessions forgotten for the moment, as he concentrates on performing the new drying spell.

Clearing his throat, Thian points his wand at his clothes. Concentrating, he narrows his eyes and with a flourish of moves Sadie has shown him, says, "Sosteacia Preta!"

An orange bolt *shoots* from his wand and instantly not only *dries* his clothing, but sets them on *fire*. He lets out a *yell* of surprise, snatches his clothing and *tosses* them into the draining tub. There is a *hiss* as the flames disappear into the mass of remaining bubbles.

A frantic knock on the bathroom door startles him, making him jump. "Thian!" Tia's frightened voice comes through. "Thian? Are *you* alright?"

"What? Oh, uh, *yeah* sure. I'll be out in a *minute* okay?"

"You *sure* you're all right?"

"Yeah," Thian says as he now lifts his dripping clothing from the tub. "*No* problem... be there in a minute or two."

Hearing Tia walk away, he wrings out his clothes, and with a heavy sigh, puts them on. He is still dripping when he opens the door and steps into the doorway. He calls out, "Uh, *Sadie*? Can I *see* you for a minute please?"

In a moment, the tiny Sadie comes skipping around the corner, stops, and *bursts* into laughter. In another moment, *everyone*, Rayolin and Anastasia included, appear in the hallway. They all begin to laugh.

"Thian? What on *Ear...*" Amanda starts to say, then quickly says, "What in *two* moons happened?"

Tianna and Tia both turn with surprise to look at Amanda. Amanda has just used an *Elvish* expression. She has never used one before. They know of course, she was about to say "What on *Earth* happened," but changed it. Amanda looks at them for an instant, shrugs and looks back at the dripping Thian.

Thian, having turned a *very* deep shade of red says, "Well. Uh, I *put* my clothes on the changer, aimed my wand at 'em, then I concentrated *real* hard on what Sadie showed me and... and..."

"Set your *clothes* on fire?" Tianna asks now laughing so hard she grabs her side with both hands and winces.

Everyone roars.

"Well, at *least* it's a good thing I tried my *clothes* first... and not *me*."

They are all in tears. Poor Tianna has to be held up by Tia and Amanda. She is laughing and gritting her teeth in pain at the same time, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Yes, *veeeery* funny, *very* funny!" Thian says bright red with embarrassment, but beginning to laugh himself. "Uh, Sadie... would you *mind* please?"

Sadie, still laughing, steps forward, draws her wand and with a swish says "Sosteacia Preta!" Thian and his clothing are instantly dry.

"Thanks. Not as *toasty* as at the falls... but, *it'll* do."

They all laugh again as Rayolin says, "Well, I think your *timing* is just about right Thian. Dinner should be about ready. I hope you're all *hungry*! We have loads, so eat as much as you like!

"I've treated and bandaged Tianna and Tia, and tended to Amanda's bites and stings, and now, if you don't *mind* Thian, I'd like to have a look at your bites and stings, and that gash on your leg before we sit for dinner."

Rayolin treats Thian's leg, the bites, stings and other cuts and scrapes, then wraps his leg. They all sit and have a wonderful dinner. They chat about the area, and the kids learn of other attacks from those called the Cormacs.

Soon, Rayolin says, "Listen, it's getting late, and you *all* look like you're about to fall asleep at the table. We only have two guest rooms. So, I'm afraid you girls will have to share a room. It looks like *you* get a room all to yourself Thian."

Thian smiles saying, "I guess being the only boy has *some* advantages."

The girls all look at him with daggers, Tianna putting her hands on her hips.

"Oooor... *not*, I guess... *actually*," Thian says as his smile fades and he looks a little sheepish.

The girls all *burst* into laughter and Tia tosses her lapkin at him, making him laugh.

"I'm afraid there's only one bed in each room, but *two* of you could share it... it's big enough I think. We *do* have enough sleeping sacks for the rest of you though, if you don't mind?"

"That would be *great*!" Tia says getting up. "But let us help clean up first."

"Oh *no* dear... *not tonight*," Rayolin says with a laugh. "But I *may* take you up on that in a few days though."

"Done!" Amanda says with a grin. "We really are tired. At least, *I* am anyway. We *really* appreciate your hospitality!"

"My pleasure dear. Now *off* you go, we can continue our chat tomorrow."

"Um, would it be alright if I gave my room to them? I mean, would it be alright if I just slept on the *couch*?" Thian asks.

The girls turn and look to him with surprise on their faces.

"*What?* I just thought *you* should all have a nice place to sleep. *I* don't mind sleeping on the couch you know."

So, it was settled. The girls would double up in the two rooms, with Thian taking the couch.

It stayed that way for the remainder of their stay.

Over the next month, the kids get to know and *really* like Rayolin and Anastasia. Rayolin has become a cross between a *mom* who really cares about them, a *great* healer who tends their wounds, and a *very* good friend, who shares what little they have to give.

Delten, Cinobin, Beska and the other villagers, are told that Rayolin and Anastasia have taken the kids in, and are doing their *very* best to treat the *horrible* Morlango plague, and keeping the kids in *isolation*. Rayolin has told the villagers that she and Anastasia had been *vaccinated* years ago against this *very* rare plague. So, not only could they *not* get the plague, but they could not *spread* it either. Which of course, makes *no* sense whatsoever, but then again, those in the village are *not* very bright.

Rayolin is quite busy, going from one house to the other, checking the villagers for *any* signs of the dreaded *Morlango* plague. She feels a little guilty, because she charges for the visits. But then again, she *has* to keep up the ruse for the kids' sake, and after all, she has made *more* money this month, than she had over the *entire* last year.

Rayolin told the villagers that she needed to let the kids out at night, because they needed fresh air and some exercise. She also told the villagers that *they* needed to stay inside from just before sunset, until just after sunrise, or they *may* be exposed to contaminated air, which could have *plague* particles that could be breathed and... well, *that* would be a *very* bad thing indeed!

She told the villagers they needed to continue taking a bath at *least* every other day, but that they did not have to scrub themselves *raw* any longer, *nor* use salt... just a good amount of *soap*, and that they needed to *soak*, not just get in and right out again. She had received loud

complaints from everyone. That is, until she said that it was *their* choice. They could either stay *healthy*, or... there is *still* a lot of room in the cemetery.

That seemed to be enough to keep them *very* clean, which made her laugh every time she left their homes. She had even talked them all into washing the *insides* of their homes, since this particular *strain* of the Morlango plague, seems to like *dirty* and messy houses.

When she had first begun to spread that news around, she actually had to keep from laughing as she walked through the village, as people were seen through the windows washing *everything* in sight... *twice*! She had even noticed that the porches on most of the homes had been swept every day. Even *Delten's* broken down old house had *spotless* windows and a well swept porch.

Rayolin decided to sneak over to look through Delten's windows, when she *knew* he was in the hills, still trying to find that *blasted* treasure after all the years he had been in the village. She looked in and her jaw *dropped*. It actually looked cleaner than *her* house. She turned around putting a hand over her mouth, as she hurried away stifling her laughter. When she told Anastasia and the kids, they *all* had a great laugh.

The kids all like Anastasia too. She is fifteen and *very* inquisitive. She is learning to be a healer like her mom, and of course, Anastasia, Rayolin and Tia get along really well, since Tia is also studying to become a healer, like *her* mom had been, before Blaine killed her.

It is only the second week when, during dinner, Amanda surprises everyone when she looks at Rayolin and Anastasia saying. "I think you need to know why we're here, and *where* we need to get to."

Thian *chokes* on his Cucuteo, and Tianna actually *spits* out some Eldorian tea, as she gasped while attempting to swallow at the same time. Embarrassed, she says, "Uh, *sorry*," and wipes her face, then dabs where the tea sprayed over the table.

"Amanda..." Tia says looking at her with a worried expression, giving a slight shake of her head.

"Yeah... I know." Amanda puts her glass of tea down. "But listen, Rayolin and Anastasia haven't only taken us into their *home*, they've *fed* us, made *new* clothing for us, and are *treating* our wounds, bites and stings, and they haven't *asked* for a cent... I mean, any *money* at all. They've only asked us *twice* where we're from, and what we're doing here. They haven't pressed us at all, even when we *didn't* answer. They haven't treated us poorly in the least. And even though it's only been a couple weeks, I *really* consider them our friends.

"Besides, they *live* here, and have for a *long* time. I mean, Anastasia was even *born* here in the village. So, *they* know the land around here and we don't. I think we *may* need their help. You know?"

The kids all look at Amanda for a moment, then to both Rayolin and Anastasia, who are looking back a little surprised, but most expectantly.

"Yeah, you're right." Thian sets down his fork as he licks a piece of Cucuteo dangling from his lower lip. "They didn't *have* to take us in, and I'm not really sure *what* Delten and Beska would have done with us. I mean, it's not like we could give them *coordinates* to where we come from. And I don't *like* them much either you know. So, yeah, *I* vote we tell 'em. Well, *some* anyway. *However* much Amanda wants - that's okay with me."

After a few moments, everyone agrees. Amanda begins, "I don't mean to sound, *mysterious* or anything, but we can only tell you that you're right. We're *not* from around here."

"And I *bet* you're not even from this part of the *realm* either are you?" Anastasia asks very excited. "Your *clothing* material wasn't *anything* like we have around here. And your *brooms*...

I, uh, was looking at them yesterday. *They're* nothing like what we have here either. So, you must be from some place *really* far away."

"You can say *that* again!" Thian says with a laugh. "We're not even from this..."

"*Half* of the realm," Tianna says cutting Thian off. "You're right. We're from, like the *opposite* side of the realm."

"We *have* come a very long way," Amanda says with a smile. "So, of *course* our clothing and other things *would* be different than they are here. But we need to find someplace called... *Kelmar*. Have you ever heard of it?"

"*Kelmar? Sure,*" Rayolin says glancing at Anastasia who has her mouth open and eyes wide. Rayolin, looking back to Amanda, asks in a suspicious tone, "*Whhhhhhy* are you looking to go to *Kelmar?*"

Amanda looks at the stunned face of Anastasia, then to the furrowed brows on Rayolin. "Uh, well, we have to get to someplace called *Witch Mountain*."

Both Rayolin and Anastasia gasp with eyes wide.

"*What?*" Thian asks a little startled. "What's *wrong?*"

"*They're* looking for it too momma! I *know* they are!"

"Looking for... *what?*" Tianna asks just as surprised as anyone.

"The *treasure* of course!" Anastasia says very excited, a huge grin spreading across her face.

"Treasure? *What* treasure?" Sadie says leaning forward on the chair stacked with books, so she can see over the top of the table.

"The *Tal'* Reann treasure of course," Anastasia says with excitement. "*That's* why this village *still* exists. It's been here for *thousands* of years like we told you. *Remember?* That's why the *Cormacs* come. Of course, like we *said*, the village has been torn down and rebuilt *lots* of times. But, *that's* why the village was built way out *here* in the first place!"

"I don't understand," Amanda says. "There really *is* some treasure buried around here? And people have been *looking* for it for *thousands* of years? And *no* one has ever found any of it?"

"Well, maybe *some* of it, or so they think," Rayolin says, taking a sip of her tea, as she studies the kids. "Twenty-three *hundred* years ago, or there about, over *ten* Kellakos in gold were found in... *Kelmar*. Most scattered around here and there, but the *majority* of it was found against the mountainside. But the ones who *found* it, never told *exactly* where they found the mass of it, and were said to have been *kidnaped* and killed before they talked. People have been looking for that *fool* treasure for centuries. The *Tal'* Reann treasure, is said to be worth over *thirty-three* Gumptars." The kids gasp.

"Uh, how much is *that?*" Amanda asks looking to her friends. "I mean in, uh, *dollars* you know?"

"*Dollars?!*" Rayolin asks. "What do *you* know about *dollars*? And *why* would you ask about a currency *not* of this realm?"

Amanda's eyes go wide as she looks to the others, who also look startled.

"You're... you're from the *Earth* realm aren't you?" Rayolin says as the color drains from her face. "But... that can't *be*..."

She turns to look at Thian, Tia and Tianna. "You're *elves* of course... yes, I can see that. We have *lots* of elves here from other realms." Turning to look at Sadie, who slumps lower in her chair, she continues, "I'm not sure what race *you* are though, but not elf and not *Vehas* as we are."

Turning back to Amanda, "*You* are neither elf *nor* Veba either. I needed to study the physiology of *many* kinds of peoples, from *many* realms when I was in medical school. I was

fascinated by several realms, *Earth* being one of them. I remember *distinctly* hearing the word *dollar* tied to the currency of some place on Earth. I don't remember what *area* of Earth, but there is *no* other realm I know of that uses that word for their currency. *Are* you... are you *really* from there?"

## Learning About Witch Mountain

[To TOC](#)

Everyone looks scared as Amanda says, “I, uh, well...”

“No! Don’t tell her you *are* Amanda!” Thian cries out.

“I think you just *did* you *idiot*!” Tianna hisses at Thian.

“But... *how*? How could you *possibly* have traveled here from... *earth*?” Then looking at Thian, Tia and Tianna says, “And you *elves* are from earth too?” Then looking at Sadie, “And *you*?”

“Rayolin,” Amanda says with a shaky voice, “we can’t tell you *how* we got here, or exactly *why* we’re here. It’s for *your* safety as well as our own. *Please* believe me. We didn’t come here looking for the treasure. We need to find a witch named *Bellinora* who we were told lives in someplace called, *Witch Mountain*. We were told that the way *into* Witch Mountain was in a place called *Kelmar*.”

“Stutterin’ *Snorkrats*!” Anastasia says looking wide eyed with a grin. “Momma, I *told* you all the stories I read about Witch Mountain were *true*! It *does* exist inside, I *knew* it! And *Bellinora* is said to be one of the most *powerful* witches in the mountain! I’ve read *all* about her, *both* *Cassandra* and I have been looking for the entrance to Witch Mountain for *years*!”

“They’re just *stories* folks have told over the years,” Rayolin says crossing her arms with a frown. “Folks have been talking about the *strange* things you could find in Witch Mountain, for as *long* as I can remember. My *folks* used to talk about the stories *they* were told as kids themselves. They’re just, *stories*, that’s *all*! People have looked for that *entrance* even longer than they have looked for the *treasure*.”

“But momma, it *has* to be true doesn’t it? I mean, if *they* were sent here, and know the way *in*, and are *really* going to find *Bellinora*...”

“Do you know the way into Witch Mountain?” Rayolin asks uncrossing her arms and leaning forward slightly.

“Uh, well, not *exactly* where,” Amanda says nervously. “I mean, we’re not *really* sure. We need to get to *Kelmar*, then, uh, do some *other* stuff, and then, well, *maybe* we can find the entrance. But, the thing is, we have no idea *how* to find *Bellinora*.”

“I do!” Anastasia says excitedly. “That is, I *think* I do. I’ve studied everything I could *find* about Witch Mountain! I know *lots* of places in there too, if they’re *real* and all, and some of the books I read talked about a cave, *high* in a mountain where *Bellinora* is said to live. If we could get *inside* Witch Mountain, I really think I could find the way to someplace they would know her for *sure*!”

“Anastasia,” Rayolin says shaking her head. “You and *Cassandra* have been looking for that entrance since just after you learned to *fly*, and have *never* found it! Neither has *anyone* else. And, you have looked all *over Kelmar* and even the surrounding area.

“You two have also looked for, and *talked* about the treasure, ever since the two of you could *talk*. There *is* no treasure, and there is *no* entrance to someplace called... *Witch Mountain*!”

“They’re just *myths*, and *tens* of *thousands* have lost their lives looking for *both* over many centuries!”

“Well, I don’t know about this *treasure* you’re talking about,” Amanda says now a little calmer, “but we have it on *very* good authority, that not only *is* there an entrance to Witch Mountain, but that *Bellinora* is real too. We were sent here *specifically* to meet her.”

"I *knew* it! I *knew* it was true. *All* of it!" Anastasia cries as she jumps up from her chair and starts pacing.

"Amanda, I'm sorry, but this is just *too* hard to believe," Rayolin says shaking her head, but you can begin to hear the doubt in her own words.

Tianna says, "Then what about us? How did *we* get here? How did Amanda get from *earth*, to our realm, and then all of *us* from our realm, to *yours*? You haven't seen *clothing* like ours, because they're not made of *materials* found here on *your* realm."

"Yeah, and what about our *brooms*?" Thian asks. "You've never seen anything like *them*, because the *Wizitch* technology doesn't exist here. Amanda's *telling* you the truth. We were *sent* here to look for Bellinora, by people we *trust* with our lives. In fact, we *owe* them our lives."

Rayolin has a hard time believing they can find the entrance to the fabled Witch Mountain, but she does have to accept that they are *not* from this realm.

Over the next three weeks, the kids get to know a girl named Cassandra, who is Anastasia's best friend, and the same age as Anastasia, fifteen. Her clothing is a bit shabby, and reminds Tia, Tianna and Thian of the clothing they had worn all their lives, and had been made fun of for wearing.

It does not take long to figure out that Cassandra is the village *gossip*. She has the latest *dirt* on everyone, and will *tell* anyone who will listen... which, according to Anastasia, is just about *everyone* in the village. Cassandra lives with her uncle. Her mom and dad had been killed in the same raid on the village as Anastasia's dad.

As Tianna's bruised and cracked ribs began healing, thanks to Rayolin's use of some powerful herbal applications and some healing spells, the kids begin to enjoy their time out at night. The entire *village* is scared to death of catching the plague, so all doors and windows are shut *tight* from just before sunset, to just after sunrise each day.

The kids would all laugh as sunset approached, because they could actually *hear* doors slam, windows *banging* shut and latched, and when they looked out, even all the *drapes* were being pulled shut.

Anastasia and Cassandra would take the kids on flights around the area, telling them of their lives here, and how they both wished they could get away, but there is no money to go anywhere. It turns out that the man Rayolin had been married to, was killed in a raid upon their village when Anastasia was seven. He had been a carpenter in a very large city, and had met a man from this little village who told him he could make a good living repairing the buildings in the village, and building *new* homes and such.

Rayolin loved him so much, she gave up her very successful medical practice in the same large city, and moved to this area just after they were married. He built this house for them with his own two hands, with only Rayolin helping him as she could. He had built many other houses for some of the other village folk over the years, but then the raid hit and he was killed defending Rayolin and Anastasia.

The money they had saved was *long* gone. The only money they had now was the little Rayolin brought in as the village healer. Everyone raised or grew their own food, or swapped for what they needed. Without any money to leave this *dump* of a village, as Anastasia calls it, they were stuck here for good.

Anastasia and Cassandra had taken the kids many times to fly around *Kelmar*, which is only a mile or so away from Anastasia's home. The far side of *Kelmar* is nestled against a *huge* mountain which has to be at *least* twenty-five-thousand feet high, and extends all the way to the

horizon. Anastasia told them, that the ancient peoples of this land had named the mountain, Uboto Geta, which meant ‘Witch Mountain.’

It did not take long to spot the area near the lake the ancient Journal had mentioned. It was strange, but even the *trees* it described were still there.

Tianna asked why no one ever built here at the lake, and was told that people had tried, but that you could not cut down the trees anywhere *near* the lake, and that people who tried *always* died. You could swim in the lake, take water from the lake, and *fish* in the lake, but you could never *build* by the lake, nor cut the trees. Many people thought that some *spell* had been cast ages ago, to protect the area so it would look just like it did when whoever *hid* the treasure returned, so they could find it again.

A lot of people thought the treasure was someplace at the *bottom* of the lake, and many had looked for it, but never found *any* trace of it. Many died in their efforts, having drowned.

One night late in their fourth week, Tianna is *finally* proclaimed healed. So was Tia’s arm, and Thian’s leg, which only took a few days to heal. All of their bites and stings had *long* since healed too. They never told Rayolin or Anastasia *how* they got them. They had only been asked once, but Thian said, “You’d *never* believe us, and actually, for your *own* good, I think we better not say.”

This night, after dinner as usual, Cassandra came over to give the days gossip. Then, everyone but Rayolin, mounted up as they did each night, kicked off, and flew through the trees to go *exploring* in the cool night air.

“We’ve got to be moving on, now that everyone’s healed,” Amanda says as everyone slows to a hover just over the glimmering lake, dangling their feet in the cool water.

“But, you haven’t *found* where the entrance to the *mountain* is yet!” Cassandra says rather snitty.

The kids really like Anastasia, but *not* so much Cassandra. Cassandra, besides being a *gossip*, *thinks* she knows everything, and the kids do *not* trust her.

They asked Anastasia *not* to say anything about where they had come from, or *why* they wanted to get inside Witch Mountain - just that they did. Cassandra had tried *repeatedly* to get information from the kids and Anastasia, but neither the kids nor Anastasia would reveal a thing.

“Yes, well, I *think* I have an idea of how to find it,” Amanda says looking to the others for a moment, then at Anastasia and Cassandra. “We need to go and get some things we didn’t bring with us, when we came to the village. It’ll only take us a little while to get ‘em. We need *you* two to stay here, and keep a *lookout* for anyone that may be out watching us okay?”

“Yeah? Well, why can’t *we* come with you?” Cassandra asks rather hotly.

“Because we *say* you can’t! *That’s* why!” Tianna shoots back.

Cassandra is fifteen like Anastasia, and *much* bigger than Tianna and the others, but somehow, Cassandra *knows* she is no match for Tianna. The two of them do *not* get along well, and everyone knows it.

“Listen, this is *really* important,” Amanda continues. “We need the *two* of you to be our lookouts for now. We don’t want *anyone* watching or following us.”

“If you find the entrance, can *we* go with you?” Anastasia asks hopefully.

“Oh, uh, well...” Amanda stammers.

“I *know* I can find the way to Bellinora’s cave, I just *know* I can!” Anastasia pleads. “I’ve read *everything* I could find about Witch Mountain, and there was *lots* about the powerful witch Bellinora too. Please, if you really *can* find the way in, *we* want to go too! We’ve been *looking* for it all our lives... *please!*”

Amanda looks at the two of them for a moment, then to the others.

"Well, if they *do* know how to find her," Tia says looking rather skeptical, "it *would* really speed things up you know."

"I don't *like* it." Tianna says glaring at Cassandra.

Cassandra shoots back, "Whether *you* like it or not, *we're* coming with you, or we'll *follow* you wherever you go! And I'll tell *everyone* you don't *have* the plague anymore and *never* did! I'll tell them, that you *know* how to get into Witch Mountain, and you'll *never* be left alone!"

"Cassa!" Anastasia says quickly, "We are *not* going to tell anybody *anything* about this!"

"Well, maybe *you* won't, but *I* will! Either we *all* go... or *no* one goes!"

"I *really* don't like you ya know?" Tianna says pulling her wand quickly before Cassandra has a chance to move. "We could *blast* you into *oblivion* and just leave. Where we come from, we learn Wizitch you've never *heard* of when we're *really* young. *Right* Sadie?"

Sadie smiles and quickly nods.

Cassandra's eyes go wide looking at Tianna's outstretched wand, as she and Anastasia both turn pale.

"Oh for *heaven's* sake!" Amanda says. "*Put* that away Tianna. We're *not* going to hurt *either* of you. Look, we *need* to get into Witch Mountain and find Bellinora. I think we *can* find the way in, but from then on, I don't know *how* or where to find her, and I'd *really* like to call as little attention to us as possible, by *not* asking lots of people a lot of questions. If you think you can find her, and you *want* to come with us to find her... okay."

Anastasia and Cassandra cheer.

"*But...* once we *find* Bellinora," Amanda continues, "we part ways. *You* can go or do what *you* want, but *not* with us. We go our separate ways... *agreed?*"

"Agreed," Anastasia says immediately.

Cassandra hovers for a moment looking intently at Tianna. Tianna tilts her head forward a little and scowls, then twirls her wand. Cassandra, looking nervous, says, "*Yeah.* Okay, agreed."

"If we do somehow find the entrance tonight," Amanda says looking at Anastasia, "we'll fly back to your house and say goodbye to Rayolin."

Then looking from Anastasia to Cassandra, continues, "It will be up to the two of *you* to get permission to come with us. Rayolin *may* agree to let you come Anastasia, but don't *count* on it." Turning to Cassandra Amanda says very seriously, "As for *you* Cassandra, *how* you get away to come with us, must *not* in any way, reveal to *anyone*, *where* we're going, or *who* we're going to see. Understand?"

"Of *course* I understand! I'm not *stupid* you know!"

"That's *yet* to be proven," Tianna says with a shake of her head.

"Alright then," Amanda says quickly before an argument breaks out. "We may not even *find* the entrance tonight, or, maybe, we won't find it at *all*. But if we *are* going to find it tonight, we need to get started. Again, you two keep a close lookout for anyone that may be out and about tonight, even though they *think* we have the plague... *you never* know. We'll meet you back here just as soon as we can."

Amanda, Thian, Tia, Tianna and Sadie turn and fly off to retrieve their traveler's packs.

The kids fly as close to the ground and within the trees as they possibly can. They soon reach the tree line back to the mountain, and slow to a hover. After looking around to see if it is safe to continue, they head off again, this time in single file, flying about fifty-feet behind one another.

Once at the overhang, they all enter, dismount and head into the cave to gather their packs.

Tianna is the last one to fly in, as she has been watching their backs. Sadie, who had flown in just before her, is standing next to Amanda.

As Tianna dismounts, Amanda who now has her pack on, turns to face everyone. "Listen. I don't have *any* problem with Anastasia coming with us, although I don't want to put her in harm's way if, well, things *don't* go so good. But as for *Cassandra*... that's *another* story. I don't *trust* her any further than I can *drool*." Everyone laughs.

Amanda continues. "But, the thing is, Cassandra *does* know that we don't have the plague and never did. She *also* knows that we're looking for the entrance to Witch Mountain, and *who* we're going to try to find. I have *no* idea how she thinks she is going to be able to get away, and *not* tell her uncle, or *half* the village, *where* she is going, knowing her as we do now.

"If... Cassandra *does* manage to come with us, we need to keep a *very* close eye on her. She likes to gossip, and she knows *enough* to get us all in a *heap* of trouble. So, *watch* her like a hawk."

"Like a *what*?" Thian asks.

"What? Oh, uh, like an *eagle*. You know?" Then shaking her head says, "Just keep a *sharp* eye on her is all."

Everyone has their packs on - all but Sadie who does not have one.

"But Amanda," Tia says walking over holding her broom. "You said that you thought you knew of a way to find the entrance. Are you talking about what it says in the Journal?"

"Well, yeah, to a point anyway. I mean, the Journal says, after entering *Kelmar*, take the rock path to the right. Follow it to the lake. Turn around and follow it back to the treeline. Turn left and enter the *fifth* tree. *Remember?* And it says the password is 'Keltor.' It then says that we'll arrive in the *third* tree behind some old pond. Then it says to use *that* tree and same password to return."

"Yeah, well, what if we can't *find* the rock path?" Tianna asks with a frown. "I mean, we've been flying over the village, lake and along the mountain *every* night for weeks. The trees are still there, since it seems someone cast a *spell* that won't let you cut them down. But, I don't remember seeing any rock *path* leading to the lake. And there must be *thousands* of trees around the lake too. We have *no* idea where the rock path begins, and it could wind its way to meet the lake at *any* point at all, anywhere around it. It could take *years* to try the password on every tree."

"You know, you're *right*!" Tia says looking worried. "I don't remember seeing any rock path either, and we've flown all around the lake, *and* around the village. If there *is* a rock path, I really think we would have *seen* it, don't you?"

Amanda is holding her broom with a huge smile on her face when Thian asks, "What? Why do *you* look so happy? Did *you* see the rock path?" Thian asks hopefully.

"Nope. And I was looking *really* hard for it too."

"Well, *something's* up," Tianna says with a sly smile, "so let's *hear* it."

Amanda laughs, "I think we now possess the *secret* key to find the rock path, and, if we *can't* find the entrance when we get, uh, *out* of the tree near some pond, I think our *secret* key may be able to *find* the entrance."

"*What* key?" Thian asks looking from Amanda to the others. "You mean that old *skeleton* key you found? But I thought it only opened that huge door back on *earth*."

"Well, that key *did* open that door, but that's *not* the key I'm talking about. *I'm* taking about, our *secret* key. The one that I think will not only *find* the path, but find the *entrance* for us too."

“Wait...” Thian says shaking his head like he is trying to clear it. “How can a key *find* anything? A key just *unlocks* something... err, *doesn't* it?”

Amanda laughs and tilting her head slightly says in almost a whisper, “Not *this* one. *Our* key can find things *no* one else can see, unlocking the *mysteries* of the unseen.” After a short pause, everyone looking at Amanda like she has gone mad, Amanda shifts her eyes to Sadie, tilts her head forward and fixes her stare on her.

Everyone turns to look at Sadie, who looks rather startled as she looks from one confused face to the other. “What? Why are you all staring at *me*? I don't have any secret key... *honest*.”

Amanda smiles as she walks to Sadie, and while resting a hand on Sadie's shoulder, turns to face the others confused expressions. “No, Sadie doesn't *have* a secret key... she *is* our secret key!”

“*What?!*” Thian asks, looking at the tiny Sadie.

“What are you *talking* about Amanda?” Tianna asks coming to stand with Amanda and Sadie.

“Remember how Sadie was able to *find* us, *trapped* in that well, near that huge face, and was able to get us out?” Turning to look down into Sadie's puzzled eyes, she asks, “Sadie... do you think you can use your powers, to see through things like overgrown *foliage*, and layers of *dirt* and stuff, to *find* the rock path hidden beneath all of it?”

Sadie blinks several times, then looks from Amanda to the others who seem to have caught on to what Amanda has in mind. “Uh, well, I don't know. I've never *tried* that before. But... if I can see fifteen to thirty feet, sometimes through *solid* rock...” then after several moments of biting her lower lip, with an expression of intense concentration, “Yeah, you know, I think I *might* actually be able to do it!”

Everyone cheers, as Sadie beams.

“Sadie,” Amanda asks, “If we come out of the tree where there is *supposed* to be an old pond, and it's not there anymore, do you think you might be able to see where it *used* to be?”

“Oh, um, well, I'm not sure what that would really even *look* like. But, uh, I could give it a *try* I guess.”

“Great. But whether the pond is there or not,” Amanda continues, “we know the *entrance* will be hidden. What I'm hoping, is you can use your powers to look *inside* the mountain near the base, where we come out of the tree. I'm *hoping* you may be able to spot some hidden *cave* that may lead us inside. Can you *do* that?”

Sadie is excited now, as are the others and smiles. “Well, that I *know* I can do! If there is a hidden opening of some kind, *I* can find it!”

Everyone cheers again. Amanda holds up her hands for quiet. “Great. I thought you might be able to. But here's the thing... we can't let Anastasia or Cassandra know how we find the way to the tree at the lake... *if* Sadie can *find* the rock path that is. Nor can we let them know Sadie is the one finding the way into the mountain. It would raise too many questions, at least for now.”

“You know, I've been *thinking* about Cassandra,” Tianna says as she begins to pace. “What if Sadie looks for the rock path on our way *back* to Anastasia and Cassandra? If she *spots* it, we can follow it to the lake, and make a *note* as to where it meets the lake. Then, we can fly over to them, telling them we got *lost* for a little bit, and that's why it's taken us so long.

“Then, *why* not just fly around back to that spot, and go left like the Journal said to. We don't *have* to tell them why we want to fly in that direction, just that we *want* to. We'll know if the trees the Journal mentions are still there anyway. Then, since we don't know *where* the old pond is, maybe as we fly around the lake, Sadie can be looking for any signs of *it*. If she *does* spot it,

Sadie can say some *code* word or phrase. You know, like... ‘Was that a *Hollydink* in that tree?’ or something like that. We would then know that the entrance *had* to be somewhere nearby. We can make a slow flyby of the mountain’s base too, to see if Sadie spots the entrance, and if she *does*, we use another code word or phrase.”

“That’s a *great* idea sis!” Tia says smiling along with the others.

Tianna continues, “You know, if Sadie *does* find the entrance, we don’t have to tell either Anastasia *or* Cassandra. We can just pretend that we couldn’t find *anything*. We then fly back, spend the night, but get up *really* early. It would have to be *just* before dawn, before the villagers venture outside though. We could let Rayolin and Anastasia know we really *did* find what we were looking for, and *only* take Anastasia with us, if Rayolin will let her come that is. Cassandra won’t know and we won’t have to have *her* tagging along.”

Everyone eagerly agrees. They decide to have Sadie look for the rock path. If she finds it, the code phrase will be, “Little dots. I *miss* little dots.” Little dots, Sadie told them, was one of her very favorite candies back home. And, that since a rock path would more than likely look like lines of little dots, it would tie into the meaning of the pathway.

They decide that “*Puddles*” will be the code word for the pond, since it *would* look like a puddle next to a huge lake. Also, Sadie once had a *pet* named puddles. The code phrase for the entrance, should she find it, will be, “Flash In The Pan,” which is the restaurant she had visited in the realm of The Deep Elves. It was also someplace all the kids knew and loved, and has a hidden lake beneath the building.

“Okay, let’s get going. And Sadie, see if you *can* do your thing okay?” Amanda says as she mounts up, the others following her lead. “I hope this *works*! I really *don’t* want to take Cassandra with us! And, since the path is *supposed* to end at the lake, I don’t think we need to try to find the rock path *before* we get to the lake. It’ll save time. Either it’s still somewhere around the lake, or... well, we’ll worry about that later.

“Let’s fly back to where they say *Kelmar* begins. You can start looking there if you want Sadie, since we have to fly that way anyway. We’ll then fly a large ‘Z’ pattern, looking for the path. When we reach the lake, well, I *guess* we’ll just have to continue flying around with *them*, but we don’t have to tell them why. Let’s go.”

As they reach the base of the mountain, they head around the village, keeping out of sight. They then head for *Kelmar*. They have only gone a short distance when Sadie yells, “*Little dots! I miss little dots! I mean, I think I found it!*”

“What? *Where?*” Thian asks as everyone comes to a hover around Sadie, who is looking below them.

Pointing her little arm downward, she turns to Amanda and says, “I *can* do it Amanda! I *did* it! I never *knew* I could do it while *flying*!”

Amanda smiles and asks, “What do you see? Are you *sure* it’s a path and not just a couple of *rocks* or something?”

“Oh, it’s a *path* alright. It looks like *most* of it has been buried in layers upon layers of decaying underbrush. And the *rest* looks like it’s just been buried from mud slides, or just settling dirt over the centuries. But it’s a rock pathway for *sure*, and it heads *that* way,” Sadie points off to the right and they all begin to follow her, as she flies slowly forward, looking intently at the ground a couple yards below them. To the others, the ground looks just the same as it does most everywhere else. *They* cannot see any difference at all.

In a few minutes, they break through the trees and are headed directly at the lake. As they approach the lake, Anastasia and Cassandra spot them and fly over to meet them. By the time

they arrive, Sadie and the others are hovering right at the water's edge, looking at the trees *just* behind and to the left of them, and making a mental note of how to quickly find this spot again.

"You guys were gone a *long* time," Cassandra says suspiciously, gliding to a hover beside them. "I *thought* you said it wouldn't *take* you very long!" Narrowing her eyes and speaking very softly, she says, "We were *beginning* to think... you *may* have left without us."

"Well, we can't exactly *sneak* off now can we?" Tianna sneers at her. "It just took *longer* than we thought is all, and we got *lost* in the dark trying to find our way *back*. So, *get* over it!"

Cassandra and Tianna glare at each other for a very tense moment, then Sadie says, "Uh, I'd really like to fly around *that* side of the lake again. Isn't that where you *think* we might find something Amanda?"

Since they just found where the tree *is* they are supposed to enter, but seeing that those trees are on the side of the lake furthest *away* from the mountain, Sadie decides they may as well look around the side of the lake that is *closest* to the mountain, thinking she might be able to spot either something that *looks* like a buried pond, or, maybe even the *entrance* to the mountain itself, while flying against the mountain's base.

"What? *Oh*, uh, *sure*! Yeah let's look around over *there* and see what we can find."

"What are we *looking* for?" Anastasia asks quite excited.

"We'll know it when, and *if*, we see it," Tianna says with a slight grin.

They head off around the lake to the other side. Sadie, looking as *hard* as she can, cannot see *anything* at all that looks like a pond, as they make their way along the area between the lake and the mountain. On their way back, they fly close to the mountains base, but again find nothing.

When they have covered the *entire* length of the mountain near the lake, and about a *mile* in each direction beyond it, not finding anything, they all come to a hover.

"Well, *this* was a little discouraging," Thian says with a sigh. "We didn't find *anything* at all."

Cassandra narrows her eyes as she studies each of the kid's faces. "Soooo. You *didn't* find... anything? Are you *sure*? You're not *lying* to us are you?"

"No, we're not *lying* to you!" Tianna snaps. "Do we *look* happy to you? We *thought* we would find... *something*, but we *didn't*! Is that okay with *you*?"

"We'll just have to look again *tomorrow* night is all," Amanda says also sounding very disappointed. "I'm bushed. Let's get back and get some sleep. We need to rethink this some."

Cassandra snorts. "Yeah, well... *whatever*. See you tomorrow Anastasia." Then looking briefly at the others, "*Later*..." and turns and flies off toward home.

"I really, *really* don't like her!" Tianna snarls.

The others nod. Thian yawns. "Well, tomorrow *is* another night. Maybe we'll do better then. It's gettin' light, we really need to get back before people start coming out and spot us."

They turn and head for Anastasia's house. As they fly, they do not talk. Everyone is very disappointed and tired... Sadie, the *most* disappointed of all, feeling she has let her friends down, and that *maybe*, she is not *good* enough to be part of the team.

They arrive at the house and enter. The kids say goodnight to Anastasia, then to Rayolin, or actually, more like good *morning* to Rayolin, who has just finished her breakfast and is getting ready for her rounds in the village. The kids in the village are all home schooled, so Anastasia has no school to go to.

Thian takes his place on the couch, curls up and is instantly asleep. The girls head to their rooms to get some sleep as well. It is after midday when the girls come in to wake Thian, who rolls off the couch and lands *hard* on the floor with a cry of surprise.

Rayolin is in the village as usual, tending to the villagers almost daily cuts, scrapes, bruises and broken bones from searching for the treasure. Anastasia can be heard *snoring* in the other room.

“Wha...” Thian starts to say as a hand *clamps* over his mouth. Tianna leans down and whispers, “Come on, we all need to talk.”

Thian says he has to go potty first, and trots off for the hallway, running *squarely* into the doorjamb, darn near *knocking* him silly. Tianna shakes her head as she watches him stagger further down the hall and round the corner, then hearing the bathroom door shut.

“*Honestly!*” she whispers, “It’s a *wonder* that Thian is *still* alive. I mean, it’s not like he couldn’t *see* the doorway. *Geez!*”

The others giggle.

A couple minutes later, Thian meets the girls in one of the rooms.

“What’s up?” Thian whispers, shutting the door, still looking sleepy.

“Well, I was *really* hoping that Sadie would be able to find the rock path, which she *did*,” Amanda says with a yawn. “*But*, she wasn’t able to spot anything that looked like a *pond* or a hidden *entrance* into the mountain near the lake. So, I *guess* there’s only one thing left we *can* do now.”

“Yeah, use the *password* to get inside the *fifth* tree to the left of the pathway at the lake,” Tia says working a kink from her neck. “But what about Anastasia and *Cassandra*? Anastasia says she *may* be able to find her way through Witch Mountain, without having to ask *too* many questions. She says she thinks she knows where *Bellinora* lives too. If she does, it really *would* save time, and lessen the *attention* on us and our chances of getting caught.”

They talk things over for a while. At times with *raised* voices, as Tianna voices her *objection* to taking Cassandra along.

Suddenly there’s a knock on the door. Everyone falls silent for a moment. Amanda gets up off the bed and opens the door. Anastasia looks at Amanda, then to the others all gathered on the bed.

“Uh, I heard *loud* voices and was wondering if something’s wrong.”

“Well, *actually*, I’m glad you’re here,” Amanda says motioning for Anastasia to enter. “We were just talking about what we need to do now, and, well, about taking you and Cassandra with us.”

“What about us? You *said* we could come. You’re not backing *out* are you?”

“Oh, well, we really like *you* Anastasia. It’s just that, well...”

“We can’t *stand* Cassandra!” Tianna hisses. “And we don’t *trust* her either! We *don’t* want to take her with us!”

Anastasia strides over to stand directly in front of Tianna with a stern expression on her face. “But she’s my *best* friend. *We’ve* been looking for the way in all our *lives*. You *said* we could come!”

Tianna holds her hands up and shrugs. “Well, we don’t want *her* to come.”

Anastasia glares at Tianna saying, “You *all* agreed the other night. You *all* agreed that Cassa and I *could* come with you, as far as *finding* Bellinora. *Then...* we go our separate ways. *Now* you’re telling me that you... *lied*? You *gave* us your *word*!”

“Where *I* come from, we *honor* our word. Or do you *elves* just say *anything* to get what you want, then *dishonor* yourselves and your *kind* by backing *out*? You should *never* give your word if you’re not going to *keep* it! You are either *honorable...* or you’re *dirt*! Which is it?” and glares at Tianna.

Tianna, being a right fighter, someone who has always stood up for what is right, even when it gets her in *deep* trouble from time to time, feels as though she has just been *slapped*... hard, across the face. Her eyes go wide as she turns several shades of red. Not from anger, but *embarrassment*. Anastasia is right. Tianna and the others *had* all agreed that day, and settled on the fact that *both* Cassandra and Anastasia could come.

Tianna looks to the other startled and somewhat reddened faces. Then swallowing hard and licking her lips, she looks back up and into Anastasia's probing eyes. "Uh, I'm... I mean... you're *right*. We *did* give our word, and where *we* come from, our word represents the *honor* within us. I... you... yes, you *and* Cassandra can come."

"But, you *still* need to get Rayolin to agree to *let* you come, *remember*?" Amanda says. "And Cassandra has to get permission to come too. If she doesn't..."

"Then she doesn't come with us," Anastasia agrees.

"Listen," Amanda says after a pause. "You and Cassandra have the *rest* of today, tonight, *and* tomorrow, to convince Rayolin and Cassandra's uncle to let you come with us. *Tomorrow* night, we leave... *with* you, or without you, *okay*?"

"Yeah, okay, *thanks*," Anastasia says with a smile returning to her face. Come on, let's have something to eat, I'm *starved*. After that, I'll go find Cassa and tell her what's up. Oh, and I'll *remind* her that she can't tell her uncle *where* she's going, or for *how* long, just that she is. I've got *no* idea how she's going to do it though. I mean, where can she say she's *going*? None of us have any money to go... well, *anywhere* at all. Her uncle doesn't *like* her much though, so, maybe. I just don't know."

They all have a good breakfast and in no time, everyone is laughing and all feel like friends again. Soon, Anastasia leaves to find Cassandra and tell her what is planned.

The kids talk for some time, then decide to get some more rest. That night after dinner, Anastasia and the kids are helping Rayolin with the dishes, when Anastasia says, "Uh, *mom*? Can we sit and talk for a minute?"

"Sure honey. What's up?"

Anastasia looks to the kids and nods. Amanda turns and says, "Oh, well, I think we should leave the two of you alone," and turns and begins walking away. "Come on, let's go in the other room and have a *chat* of our own."

It is only a few minutes later, when the kids all sitting on one of the beds, hear raised voices. This goes on for over an *hour*. Then there is a few moments of silence, followed by the *slamming* of the front door, which rattles the entire house.

"Oh *God*!" Amanda says looking frightened. "Sounds like Anastasia is *really* upset and left the *house*. Or Rayolin maybe. Guess Rayolin *won't* let her come after all. I really can't blame her though. I *really* like both of 'em, and feel bad about getting them *mad* at each other. I hope Rayolin isn't to mad at *us*. She's been *wonderful* to us you know?"

"Yeah, she really has," Tia says sadly looking down at her hands resting in her lap. "I hope that..."

There is a knock on the door making everyone jump. They look to one another with frightened expressions. Tia gets off the bed and opens the door. Rayolin is standing there rather flushed, with somewhat of a blank expression. "May I come in?" she asks evenly.

"Yeah, *sure*... please," Tia motions towards the bed.

"Thank you." Rayolin walks to the bed and takes a spot. "I hear you're all going to be leaving tomorrow night, is that correct?" The kids nod slowly, but do not say anything.

“Anastasia tells me, that *she* and Cassandra were invited to come along. I assume that’s true, because Anastasia *doesn’t* lie to me.” Tianna swallows and turns red from embarrassment as she nods along with the others.

Rayolin sits silently for a moment, looking down at her hands clasped in her lap, then continues in a calm, soft voice. “I see. I want you to know something,” she says looking up into their expectant faces. “*I* don’t believe that *any* treasure exists here. Nor do I believe that the *majority* of it is hidden in some place called Witch Mountain, which is said to actually be *inside* the huge mountain near the lake, which has the same name.

“Which is *ridiculous* of course! I mean... a mountain *inside* another mountain? How *foolish*! *Tens* of thousands of people have spent, and *lost* their lives over the centuries, *looking* for both. *None*, as you know, have *ever* found neither the treasure, said to have been buried on *this* side of the mountain, *nor*, of course, a way *into* that mountain.

“I don’t want Anastasia to *waste* her life looking for something that *doesn’t* exist. Simply *wasting* her life, looking to fulfill a *dream* which will *never* come true. A dream to find things that are simply *myths*. Nothing more than *stories* that have become more and more exaggerated over time. I *love* her... more than *anything*, and I don’t want to see her get hurt. She’s all I *have*. She’s all I live for.”

For a moment, no one speaks. All the kids feel *horrible*. Looking at Rayolin’s saddened face, they see tears make their way down her cheeks. They all begin tearing up too.

Wiping her eyes and clearing her throat, Amanda says softly, “*We* don’t want her to get hurt either. We really like Anastasia, *and* you. We wouldn’t do *anything* to cause either of you any pain, if we could help it. We don’t know *anything* about any treasure either, on this side of the mountain, or, uh, *inside* it. But, we *do* know that there *is* a way into Witch Mountain, and ,well, have a kind of *map* to get inside.”

Rayolin snaps her head up looking confused. “What?”

The kids look nervous, as Amanda continues. “I can’t tell you the whole story, but we have a kind of map, which was written hundreds, or maybe *thousands* of years ago. It shows how to get into Witch Mountain... if the way still *works* that is.

“We didn’t say anything before, and we haven’t told Anastasia or Cassandra about it either. We don’t want *anyone* to know. I’m only telling you because we don’t want you and Anastasia to fight.

“Anastasia said she’s read *everything* she could about Witch Mountain, and thinks she can find the way to Bellinora’s cave. We have it on *very* good authority, that Bellinora not only *exists* within the place *called* Witch Mountain, but that we must meet with her. I can’t tell you why. *Please*, don’t be mad at Anastasia. She just wants to help us, and to find something she has been looking for, for, like... *forever*. She’s talked a lot to us about wanting to go on adventures, and *look* for lost treasure and stuff. Didn’t *you* ever want to do those things?”

Silence.

After an uncomfortably long pause, Rayolin wipes her tears away and looks up into all their faces. Softly, sadly, she says, “Yes. *I’ve* wanted to do those things too. And in a way, I *guess* I have. When I was first married, my husband was *so* excited about coming here, I just *couldn’t* refuse. I soon became as *excited* as he was. Coming here was one of my *greatest* adventures. Filled with joy, adventure, *excitement*... then sorrow so *deep* I thought it would take my spirit.

“The excitement of the unknown. The *promise* of wealth. The opportunity to *learn* new things, and meet new people. We came here, my husband and I. Excited to *explore* our new surroundings, make a home for ourselves, start a family... be happy. And at first we were. The

excitement every day we woke was *exhilarating*. We were *filled* with the wonder of what each new day would bring. The excitement in the village, among the villagers as they *constantly* talked of the treasure supposedly buried here, became contagious.

“My husband built our home here, with his *own* two hands. I helped as best I could of course. He built many other homes here too. He repaired many of the buildings when he could, *ages* ago now it seems. *I* became the only healer within *three* hundred miles, even though there is a city not far from here. We were both very busy.

“After a time, he became *more* and more interested in the treasure, just like the others in the village. After Anastasia was born, I saw less and less of him. He began spending more time looking for that *blasted* treasure than he did building. Then the attack came... and he was taken from us forever. If it weren't for Anastasia, I would *never* have survived the loss of him. I loved him soooo much.”

The tears are freely flowing down Rayolin's face. “I *miss* him so much. I don't think I could *survive* if something happened to Anastasia. I just *couldn't* take it.”

Everyone is in tears. Amanda looks at Tia and Tianna, knowing they are thinking of their mom, who *they* have just lost, and knowing they are thinking about how *they* are going to survive without her. The hole in their hearts is as *deep* as a bottomless pit. The *ache* of wanting her, *missing* her... always burning within them.

“Wiping her eyes and sniffing, Amanda says, “I, I'm really sorry Rayolin. We just didn't *think*. We *never* should have offered. I hope she doesn't hate us, or you, because you won't let her come. But we understand, really.”

“What dear?” Rayolin says, dabbing at her eyes with a white cloth she pulls from her dress pocket. “Won't... oh, *no*. You misunderstand. I told her she *can* go with you!”

They all look to her in surprise. Tianna stutters, “You... you told her she *can come*?”

“Yes. We had *quite* a discussion, as I'm sure you heard. But like we just discussed, *she* wants to go on her own adventures, explore *new* places and discover *new* things, *learn* new things, meet other people from different places. I've never *seen* her so excited before... *ever*,” Rayolin laughs then continues. “And she's been *excited* about a lot of things over the years, let me *tell* you.” She laughs again as the others laugh nervously with her.

“But, we heard the *door* slam,” Thian says looking confused. “We thought she ran off *really* upset, because you wouldn't let her come.”

“Oh, no! After we hashed things over for a while, I realized she was *right*, and this *may* be her one chance to get away from here, and to have her *own* adventures with people she likes and *trusts*.”

Tianna turns a little red and looks away for a moment.

“I told Anastasia that if she was going to go off on an *adventure*, she had better get into the village and pick up a few things for her traveler's pack. Oh, and Sadie... she's getting a traveler's pack for *you* too, along with several things to put in it. We can fill in the *rest* when she gets back.”

The kids are *thrilled* and Amanda walks to Rayolin and gives her a long, warm hug, followed by each of the others giving her a hug too, with little Sadie *hugging* her to the point everyone is beginning to think she is *stuck*.

“Now now! *Enough* of this,” Rayolin says wiping a tear and sniffing.

“Rayolin,” Amanda asks seriously, “why don't *you* come with us too? You could have, well, *another* adventure. That is, if we really *find* the way in.”

“Oh, *thank* you for asking dear. I wish I *were* coming with you, but of course, I can’t. The villagers, *believe* it or not, not only *like* me, but *need* me too. Besides, *this* is our home. At least until we get enough money to leave, which, most likely, will *never* happen. And, you will need someone here to tell the villagers not only *where* you have all gone, but *why* Anastasia went with you.”

All the kid’s eyes go wide. Rayolin continues quickly. “Don’t worry. I’m going to tell them that you finally told us where you’re from, and that I’ve convinced you that you need to get *back* to the hospital you, uh, *escaped* from, or *die*. That I have done *all* I can for you, but that it *isn’t* enough.

“I’ll tell them that you didn’t know the way back, so I sent *Anastasia* with you. I’ll tell them you came from the same city *I* had come from, a *looooong* time ago, with my husband. Also, that Anastasia is going to *stay* in the city with an aunt, for an unspecified length of time.

“Of course, I *have* no other family at all, and my husband’s family is on another realm, and there is no way for Anastasia and I to *ever* get to them. So, we have no place to go, and no one to worry about us.

“It’s just Anastasia and I now. But, since I’ve *never* talked about my family, since I don’t *have* any, I’m sure the villagers will believe me. And I’m sure they’ll be glad to be rid of *you*, so they can *once* again get together in the evenings, and *party* like they used to, swapping stories of the *treasure* and of their exploits of the day.”

They all laugh.

## Beneath The Tree

[To TOC](#)

When Anastasia returns home, she is very excited. Using Wizitch, she had sent back to the house earlier, a really nice traveler's pack for Sadie, *loaded* with lots of goodies. Sadie is *thrilled*. Rayolin helps Sadie pack more things from around the house.

Over the weeks, Rayolin had made several sets of new clothes for each of the kids. Rayolin checks the other kid's packs and adds various items she thinks they may need, including a new, very large, *self*-expanding first aid kit, which made Amanda laugh.

At dinner, Anastasia talks about how *exciting* it is going to be - setting off on a *grand* adventure, into the unknown. The others tell her that *sometimes*, even though adventures *were* usually exciting, they did not *always* go as smoothly and uneventful as one might like. It did not matter. Anastasia is too *worked* up to worry.

Anastasia tells everyone that she talked to Cassandra, when she had gone into the village for supplies, and Cassandra was really excited too. "The thing is," Anastasia says tilting her head slightly, "when I asked her *how* she was going to convince her uncle to let her go away someplace, not being able to tell him *where* she was going, or *how* long she was going to be gone, she just smiled and said, 'No problem. Don't worry. I'll meet you at your place at the usual time. Really, I've *got* it covered.' When I asked her about it later, she wouldn't talk about it. But, I *guess* she'll be coming too."

That night after dinner, Cassandra shows up at the usual time. This time, everyone including Rayolin, sits around the table talking into the night when, finally, everyone says their good nights, and all go to bed.

The next day, Anastasia and the kids sleep in till around noon. They get up, eat and recheck *everything* for like the tenth time, then busy themselves for the rest of the day, waiting for nightfall.

They have a good dinner, with lots of laughing at the stories Rayolin told, of how the villagers would get home after searching for the treasure, then jump into a *hot* tub full of soap. "I really have to try *hard* not to laugh every time I see them in the mornings. They're *spotless*. I've never *seen* the entire village this clean. Not even when we first *came* here. I think they're actually getting *used* to it!"

They all laugh again, when there is a knock at the door. The laughter stops and the smiles fade, knowing that the time to say goodbye has come. Anastasia looks at her mom, gets up, goes into the other room and opens the door. They hear Cassandra's voice saying as they approach the kitchen, "Really, I'm *telling* you, it was *no* problem!"

They enter the kitchen and Cassandra drops her traveler's pack and sets her broom aside. They take their seats. "I was just telling Anastasia, that my *uncle* said it was okay if I went off with her for *however* long we wanted. You know, like going *camping* or something. Don't worry, I didn't tell him *where* we're going! We, uh, don't get *along* very well. So, he *really* doesn't care if I go and *never* come back."

"Cassa, you *know* that's not true!" Rayolin says, but with a smile. She and everyone in the village *know* that the two of them cannot *stand* one another.

"Well, when *do* we leave anyway?" Cassandra asks with a grin.

The room falls silent.

After a long pause, everyone looking to one another, Rayolin is the first to speak. "Actually, don't you think you should get started *now*? I really think you should get a good start. You don't

know what *obstacles* you may find after all. And, of course, if you, well, *do* have any problems, you need to come *straight* back.”

Cassandra is the first on her feet. Anastasia and Rayolin lock eyes for a moment, then Rayolin slowly gets to her feet. “Well. I guess this is it then. We’ve never been apart before. But, I know you’ll be *fine* honey. And don’t *worry* about me, *I’ll* be fine here. You just take care of yourself, and *stay* out of trouble okay?”

The two hug for a long time, and with tears in both their eyes, they part. Tia steps up to Rayolin and hugs her, and thanks her for teaching her about the healing herbs and spells she had taken the time to show her. One by one, the kids hug and thank her for her hospitality, *generosity*, tending to their wounds, and *possibly* saving their lives.

Everyone gathers their things and go outside. They have their packs on, mount their brooms and kick into a hover. Everyone waves at Rayolin, who waves back, looking like she will *burst* into tears any second. With a final wave, she turns and goes inside, closing the door behind her.

Other than Cassandra, they *all* have tears in their eyes. Cassandra asks impatiently, “*Well?* What are we just *sitting* here for? Let’s get *going!*” and with that, she begins heading up and over the trees, in the direction of the lake.

After a few moments hesitation, Anastasia wipes her eyes, turning her gaze from the closed door, looks to the tree tops, and heads off, the others following close behind. It is a *very* quiet flight over to the lake.

The night is clear and cool, and the light of the huge moon lights their way. Amanda and the others again look in wonder at all the *thousands* of fire-bugs, with their orange glow illuminating the land below them. The landscape is *alive* with the glow and movement of the tiny fire-bugs. As the fire-bugs fly over the lake, the light show is simply *dazzling*. The reflections of the glow from the bugs *dancing* across the glistening water, make constant, almost *hypnotic* patterns.

When they get to the lake, Sadie takes the lead. She uses her Wizitch power to look into the ground and spot the ancient rock path. In no time, she lowers to the ground and dismounts. The others do the same.

“Why are we stopping *here?*” Cassandra asks looking around confused. “Isn’t the entrance to the mountain, uh, well, at the *mountain?* We’re on the *opposite* side of the lake.”

Ignoring Cassandra, Amanda says, “Okay Sadie.” Sadie nods, then turns and begins walking away from the lake, staring at the ground as she walks. In less than five minutes, after Sadie has followed the hidden rock path to the right for some distance, before it *twists* and turns toward the tree line, she stops and leans on a tree looking back to the lake, like she is resting. She then says, “The lake is really beautiful... *from* here.”

Cassandra and Anastasia both look at Sadie with blank expressions, then turn around to look at the lake, and back again. Cassandra asks with a rather confused look on her face, “Yeah, *so?*”

Sadie just grins saying, “Nothing. It’s just a really *beautiful* night to be starting an adventure is all. And you may not *see* this lake again for, well, who *knows* how long.”

Amanda understands that what Sadie is actually saying is... *this* is the first tree, start counting over to the fifth tree ‘*from* here.’ Amanda gives a slight nod and begins walking past Sadie, counting the trees as she goes, but not looking directly at them, just walking in a line a few yards in front of them to the left. She does not want to let Anastasia nor Cassandra know she is counting trees.

Cassandra and Anastasia have been looking at the lake, watching the fire-bugs, and back toward the dim lights of the village. They turn to see that Amanda, Sadie and the others have all

walked away and are now gathered in front of a tree a little ways off to the left. The two of them jog over to join the others.

Amanda looks around nervously, to see if there is anyone around, which makes everyone *else* look around nervously too. Amanda holds up her arms, holding her broom in her left hand and says, “Keltor!” There is a short pause, then a thin, *very* dim blue outline in the shape of an arched door appears. Everyone gasps, their eyes growing wide and jaws dropping. Cassandra and Anastasia let out a *cry* of surprise as each takes a few steps back.

Amanda turns to the others with a smile, as her friends grin back at her. Amanda then holds her hands up again saying, “Orathian!” The door in the tree pops open a little. *Just* enough to get her fingers on it and pull it open.

Thian says quickly, “Since we don’t really know *what’s* inside, um, I think *one* of us should check it out before we *all* go in.”

“So what? *You’re* the one who wants to go in and check things out?” Tianna snickers. “Just don’t set the place on *fire* if you have to use your wand.”

Thian looks like he has turned a little darker in the dim light of the trees. He purses his lips and says, “Actually, *no*, I hadn’t planned to be the first in. I was thinking that *you* should be the first. You’re the best *shot* of any of us, and if something *is* in there, *you* have the best chance of stopping *it*, before *it* gets you... or *us*.”

Amanda wished she had a camera right then. The stunned expression on Tianna’s face is *priceless*.

“Oh. Uh, well...” Tianna manages to stutter as she steps forward, placing her broom in her left hand. She draws her wand and says, “You might all want to do the *same* until we know it’s safe.”

Everyone draws their wand and you can *feel* the excitement, *tension* and apprehension. Tianna motions for everyone to move to the sides... just in case. Drawing a deep breath, she lets it out and nods to Thian, who pulls the door open. Tianna *drops* into a crouch, aiming her wand inside.

Tianna is *instantly* illuminated by a silver-blue light from within the tree. Amanda sees Tianna’s mouth open as she slowly stands, lowering her wand. Everyone steps forward to look inside too.

“I, I don’t *believe* it!” Anastasia says in awe. “It’s *been* here all the time, and we never *knew* it. It’s absolutely *beautiful*!”

The inside of the tree is glowing with a dim silver-blue light. The wooden surface of the inside, looks like it has been *hand* polished to a glass-like smooth sheen. In the center of the huge pine like tree, is what appears to be a *solid* silver, *spiral* staircase, with an elaborate, intricately carved handrail.

Tianna steps inside, once again raising her wand. Slowly moving forward, she steps to the silver staircase as the others come in and spread out around the stairs.

Cassandra steps to the staircase and running her hand over the silver handrail, looks over the side and down the spiral to a small dot of light far below. “You know, I’m sure this is *solid* silver,” she says with a grin. “This *alone* is worth a *fortune*! It will take a while to *cut* it all up and get it outside of course, but, we’ll be *rich*!” Turning around, she looks to the others. No one has a smile on their face, not even Anastasia.

“*No* one is going to *cut* up these stairs!” Tianna snarls.

Cassandra's smile fades quickly as she sees that they all feel the same way Tianna does. "Oh, uh, well, no, of *course* not." Then in half a whisper, "Not right *now* anyway." She turns and looks back down the staircase. "So, um, what's *down* there anyway?"

"We don't know," Tia says stepping between Tianna and Cassandra. "But *that's* where we need to go. So, I guess you can close the door Amanda. Then Tianna, why don't *you* lead the way down?"

Amanda turns and faces the door. Holding her arms up, she says, "Neldor!" and the door *slams* shut, the blue outline fading until they are looking at a *solid*, smooth interior.

Both Anastasia and Cassandra yell and begin pounding on the sealed doorway, afraid they cannot get out again. Amanda and the others are scared too, but not that they could not get out. They have come to *trust* the password spells for opening and closing doors. They are simply *afraid* of the unknown, which is natural.

After everyone assures Cassandra and Anastasia, that they can *indeed* get out again if they needed to, and that they have used these kinds of spells to open and close doors many times before, they calm down.

"I've never *heard* those spells before," Anastasia says with a shiver as she looks around nervously.

"They're *special* spells we learn where *we* come from," Sadie says as if she has used these all her very short life.

Tianna, stifling a laugh, begins making her way down the stairs. After she has descended fifteen steps, Tia follows. After Tia has covered fifteen steps, Sadie begins. The others follow in kind until Thian brings up the rear.

It takes almost half an hour to reach the bottom, which ends in a small cavern. It has what looks like a single set of something like *railroad* tracks, with two *ancient* looking carts sitting on them. The kids grin and walk to the thick, tarnished copper carts. The carts have a *beautiful* patina in various shades of greens and blues. Everyone walks around the carts as they look them over.

"Wow! These are *gorgeous*!" Anastasia says running her hand over the smooth surface on the top edge of the door. "And look at the wonderful *carvings* on the door panels! I've never seen *anything* like *this*! Not even in all the *books* I've read. Have *you* Cassa?"

Cassandra has stopped a few feet from the carts, and is staring at them with her mouth open. She slowly shakes her head, and seems to come out of her trance-like state. "No. *I've* never seen anything like them either. I can't believe this is all... *real*. There was a *hidden* Wizitchal door, in a tree that's been at our lake for *centuries*. And we must have *flown* by that tree *hundreds* of times! Then we find a *solid* silver spiral staircase, that takes you to some kind of underground *transportation*. I just... don't *believe* it! It's like I'm *dreaming* you know?"

Everyone laughs nervously, which seems to ease the tension.

Looking around the cavern, they cannot see any other way in or out. The only things there are the ancient looking carts resting on the old tracks, that lead into a *dark* cave-like tunnel, like entering an old *mine*.

"Well, I guess we get in and see where these take us," Sadie says as she steps up to the open air cart and faces the door. This is the front cart which faces the tunnel. She tugs on the door handle but it does not move. Tianna steps up and gives it a good *pull* and it pops open.

Tianna lifts Sadie up, who steps inside and moves to the back seat. There, Sadie sees a kind of latch behind her, and notices a long hinge about three feet further back. Amanda said it reminded her of something called the *trunk* of a car. Sadie flips up the latch and lifts the lid. It is

a type of storage area. She takes off her traveler's pack, and puts it and her broom inside. Sadie then takes Tianna's pack and broom and places them inside as well. Taking Amanda's and Thian's things, she stores them in the compartment too, then shuts and latches the lid, turns and sits with a smile on her face. There are two bench-like seats in each cart, one in front, one in back, and each seat can hold two good sized adults. Tianna steps in and takes the seat in back, beside Sadie.

"Hey, that *storage* place Sadie found is a *great* place to put our stuff," Anastasia says smiling at Sadie, who can *just* see over the front of the cart.

Amanda steps in and takes the far end of the front seat. Thian steps up and in, then takes his seat and closes the cart door.

Tia has already opened the second cart, and has stowed her pack and broom. She then steps over into the front seat, and sits in the *middle* by herself. Anastasia and Cassandra get in the back, store their things and take their seats, then Tia closes the cart door.

Thian and Amanda have found that the only thing in front of them, on a kind of dashboard, is a curved panel with a *single* glowing blue button. Thian turns around and looks back to Tia in the cart behind them and calls, "*You* have a glowing button on *your* panel?"

"*What* panel?" Tia asks looking around. "The only thing in *here* is a bar near my feet, which I can slide my feet under, and a bar in front of me. Like something to hold *onto* you know?"

"We have those bars in back *here* too," Anastasia says as she slides her feet under the bar.

"We have the same thing back here with us," Tianna says. "Just the two bars, *both* in front, and in the back."

Amanda laughs and says loud enough for everyone to hear, "We have the two bars too, but we have a glowing *button* on a small panel. I guess we *start* this ride Thian. Give it a *push* and let's see if anything happens," saying softly to herself, "I sure hope this doesn't end up like some, Indiana *Jones* ride through the *mines*."

Thian looks behind him to the others, who are all holding onto the upper bars with worried but excited expressions. Thian turns back and faces into the somewhat darkened tunnel.

Amanda is looking around. The only thing she sees at first are the tracks which seem to bend off to the left some way ahead. Looking up, she notices there is some kind of sign on one of the large wooden supports. Swallowing hard, she focuses on the writing for a moment, and while concentrating, watches the letters morph to read "*danger*."

Looking at Thian, she notices he must have just read the sign too, because his eyes just went *wide*.

Amanda looks around some more. There is a strange old *rusty* drum laying on its side off to the left, but has no writing on it. She thinks she can see some kind of heavily textured *brass* or bronze box on the right, just where the tracks bend to the left up ahead. Swallowing hard, she glances at Thian who nods, licks his lips, faces forward and holds on tightly to the bar in front of him.

Looking nervously into the darkened tunnel, Thian *presses* the button.

There is a loud *clank* and the carts *lurch* forward, making everyone cry out with surprise. The carts slowly begin to move forward across the cavern and into the darkness of the mine. All eyes are wide with frightened expressions. Everyone is now gripping *tightly* to their handrails, as their feet slid under and press *firmly* up against the bar at their feet, not knowing *what* is to come.

Another sudden *jerk* of the cart sets their hearts racing, as they pick up speed.

## One Wild Ride

[To TOC](#)



The clickety-clack of the carts moving over the tracks begins to *echo* in the darkness of the mine, as Amanda turns around and looks over her shoulder. Sadie and Tianna give a nervous but excited smile. Amanda looks around Tianna and back to the next cart which is fifteen feet behind hers. She sees Tia's frightened expression, and catches a glimpse of Anastasia's *wide* eyes before they too, are *swallowed* by the blackness. Amanda's cart *jerks* and begins to turn to the left. Snapping back around to face the front, Amanda can see *nothing* in front of her at all now. It is *completely* black which startles her.

Amanda is about to reach for her wand to get some light, but as she begins reaching down, she *screams* and grabs the handrail, holding on for *dear* life. The cart has *tipped* forward and dropped *straight* down. Amanda hears the others scream as well. Her heart *instantly* pounds painfully in her chest. Her hair is streaming out behind her, as she feels the cart *continue* to plummet. Down, *down* they fall as though falling through a vertical shaft in some *long* forgotten mine.

The nose of the cart *suddenly* begins to tip up. Amanda's head *snaps* back as she is pressed hard against the back of the seat, the cart straightening out and feels once again to be moving *horizontally* in the total darkness.

The cart snaps *hard* to the right. Thian lets out a cry as Amanda is sent *screaming* and crashes hard into him as she slides across the seat. Screams from them all are now filling the void. Amanda knows they must be in a *larger* cavern, from the distant echoes.

The cart snaps left, sending Amanda *quickly* sliding to her right and against the side of the cart. Thian then *crashes* into her, pinning her against the side.

In a moment, the cart straightens out and Thian scoots back to his side. Everyone is crying and *scared* to death, since they cannot *see* a thing. The cart makes an abrupt tilt upward and they all find themselves pressed *back* against their seats, as the cart goes *absolutely* vertical, still picking up speed. All Amanda can think of *now* is that at any moment, they are going to go *crashing* into the ceiling of the cavern and be killed.

Thian lets out a *terrified* scream as the cart tilts almost *completely* onto its right side. Thian *slams* into Amanda so hard it knocks the wind out of her. The cart flips back down for a few

seconds, then tilts on its side to the *left*. Both Thian and Amanda scream *again* as they both slide quickly across the slick seat, and strike Thian's side.

The cart does this *over* and over until it suddenly tilts upward. They rise for some time, then go through *three*, very large, vertical *forward* loops, like Amanda had seen on some roller coasters, where the cart rides on the outside of the loop, so your head is upright at the top of the loop, and you're upside down at the bottom. The *screams* coming from Thian and the others, as they *speed* down the face of the loop and begin to be whipped upside down, *chills* Amanda to the bone.

Coming out of the third forward loop, as they reach the bottom, they straighten out for a few moments. Without warning, the *front* of the cart rises and the cart begins to loop *backward*, with the cart now on the *inside* of the loop. Their heads point down as the cart shoots across the top of the loop at the *ceiling* of the cavern, although they cannot *see* it.

Amanda screams along with her friends and presses her feet *tightly* under and against the foot rail. Everyone is now *completely* beside themselves, their screams are screams of *pure* terror as they feel their bodies trying to *fall* from the cart in the total darkness. Of course, the carts are moving *far* too fast now for them to fall out. They are gripping the handrails *so* tightly their fingers are *numb*.

After the third reverse loop, the cart once again points *straight* down, but as they fall at tremendous speed, the cart begins to *spin*, as though they are speeding down a *corkscrew*. Amanda feels as though she is going to be *thrown* out of the cart at any second, to become a splattered *bloody* mass on the cavern wall.

As the cart straightens out and begins to speed horizontally again, Amanda finds that she has been holding her breath. She lets it out in one great *whoosh*, and begins taking short shuttering gasps. Looking forward, she thinks she sees something.

"Thian!" Amanda yells, her voice hoarse from all the screaming. "Is that, like a bluish *light* up ahead?" She still cannot see Thian, even though he is sitting not more than *two* feet to her left.

"Wha... *Yeah!* Yeah I *do* see something! What *is* it?"

"Don't know, but it's coming at us... *fast!*"

Amanda watches the light as her teeth jar with the constant vibration of the cart's wheels grinding on the ancient tracks beneath them.

All Amanda can do is stare at the dim blue light that is growing larger by the second. They are shooting from absolute darkness, into a very dimly lit, *gigantic* cavern.

Amanda's eyes go wide as she begins looking around. The first thing she sees is *Thian's* frightened face beside her. It looks like his eyes will actually *pop* right out of his head. She has never *seen* eyes this wide before. Thian turns his head to her for just a moment, then begins to look around with sheer *terror* on his face.

Amanda is *so* scared, she can *hardly* breathe. The others must feel the same, because the only sounds she can hear from them, is their crying, along with shuttering *gasps* for breath and sniffing.

There are ancient and *decaying* scaffolding over their heads, which seem to crisscross for *hundreds* of feet, until they disappear into the darkness far above.

Amanda hears a scream from behind her and *spins* to look over her shoulder. Tianna is looking over the side of the cart, downward. Amanda turns around and looks over the side of her cart.

Her heart *jumps* to her throat.

There are *dozens* and dozens of what look like narrow rock columns below them. The columns are made from stacked rocks of varying sizes, making the columns look like they would *crumble* and collapse at any second. The columns are crisscrossed with some types of rope bridges that have wooden planks. *Most* of the bridges are *broken* and hanging at odd angles. Amanda can see that many planks are *missing* from all of them. Many of the bridges are *dangling* down into the abyss, so *dark* below that she cannot see any bottom.

Looking harder, Amanda can make out several sets of tracks, like the one they are speeding on. But many of the tracks which make their way from one stacked rock column to the next, are *mangled* almost beyond recognition.

Amanda can see that several of the tracks, which have left one column or another, extend for some thirty feet or so, then *end* in a broken or *missing* section. Below *these* breaks, are what looks like at *least* a two-thousand foot drop, before the darkness below blocks her view any further.

Her stomach sours as she sees there are *many* such broken and mangled tracks, many stretching out around them for great distances, before *vanishing* into the surrounding darkness, all at various levels both *above* and below them.

Amanda snaps her head up, frightened out of her mind, as she realizes *they* are now speeding over the *same* ancient tracks, moving from the top of *one* very unstable rock column to another. Each of these spires are *thousands* of feet high at least, though she cannot tell for sure, because there is no *bottom* she can see... only the pitch blackness far below.

Looking forward, too afraid to look down, Amanda's eyes fly wide as she yells, "Thian! Look! *Where'd* the tracks go?!" focused on a spot just appearing out of the darkness ahead, a good distance away, where the tracks simply seem to have *ended* on the far top side of one of these *giant* stacked rock columns.

Before Thian can answer, they shoot *right* to where their track ends.

Everyone screams as the cart *flies* off the broken and twisted tracks and into *nothing* but air, now *tilting* at a slight angle. After a *terrifying* moment, their momentum slows and the cart begins to arc *downward*.

Amanda's hair streams out behind her, her knuckles *white* from gripping the railing *so* tightly, she is shutting *off* her circulation. With eyes wide, she can see nothing but more broken tracks and *dangling* rotted bridges around them as they continue to drop. Arching down more, she now sees below and in front of her, *another* set of broken tracks that are bent *up* at an angle, protruding some *fifty* feet from the rock spire those tracks continue on.

Amanda's cart, high above, seems to pass over those broken tracks below, as her cart continues to arc down as it falls, picking up *more* and more speed.

Amanda *screams* as does Thian, Sadie and Tianna, as their cart suddenly *strikes* something, *jarring* their teeth and sending them *flopping* around in their seats. Within a few heartbeats, they find themselves *whipping* along a new set of tracks. It takes Amanda several moments to realize, that *somehow*, their cart had flown off the set of broken tracks, *fallen* through the air for hundreds of feet, and had actually *landed* on the other upturned broken set of *tracks*. Her mind is reeling, trying to figure out if it was by *luck*, or *Wizitch* that they had landed on these tracks, and not have continued *plummeting* into the dark abyss below to their doom.

Amanda's heart is *pounding* so hard, she thinks it will *burst*, and that will be the end of her.

Looking forward as the tracks straighten out, she can see the tracks go from *this* cavern, into *another* some distance ahead. Her mouth is *so* dry she has a hard time swallowing.

They whip up a slight curve to the right, and head into the next cavern. Amanda has been crying so hard she can *barely* see, but there is *no* way she is going to let go of the handrail to wipe her face. This new cavern is a *narrow* but long one.

They have only gone about a thousand feet when Thian screams, “Oh *no!* *Not* again!”

Amanda, who had been looking around behind her to see if the other cart had made it or not, sees Tia’s frightened face streaked with tears staring in terror back at her, then whips back around to see what Thian is talking about.

Her eyes fly wide as she sees what *appears* to be the *end* of the tracks, just *ending* out over the rock column they are rapidly approaching. She tightens her grip on the handrail *just* as the cart tips down and they once again *scream* as they head straight down, eyes *bulging* and hair *snapping* in the air. Amanda feels like she cannot *take* anymore and will soon pass out.

They shoot down into a kind of round shaft for almost a full minute. The cart then curves up and shoots forward, once again horizontal, as they *whip* into another cavern. *This* cavern, is *huge!*

Amanda is *instantly* assaulted by the stifling heat, sweat begins to form on her face and arms. She can *feel* her damp clothing stick to her.

Amanda’s jaw *drops* as she looks around in *shock* and horror. The walls, several *miles* away in all directions, are *glowing* a dull orange. She sees what looks like more than a *dozen* orange waterfalls. “No, wait...” she says to herself through her somewhat blurry vision. “Those are *fire-falls!* Oh my *God*, *Thian*, those are *fire-falls*, that’s *lava!* Oh God... Oh *Jesus!*”

She cannot take her eyes from the sight of the huge, wide *cascading* fire-falls of lava. The cavern appears to be *rippling* in her vision, from the rising heat, like looking at pavement on a hot day. The lava *falls* several thousand feet, before flowing into a *giant* lava lake at the bottom.

The tracks that the carts are now screaming over, are again making their way over the tops of giant stacked rock spires, then whipping out over long expanses of *nothingness*, many for several *hundreds* of feet before reaching the next flattened top of a rock column. Over these long, *terrifying* gaps of open space, the tracks are suspended as though they *themselves* are some kind of bridge, bowing *down* in the middle from the weight. The sight makes Amanda *shiver*, even though it is *well* over a hundred degrees in the huge cavern.

Amanda does not want to look down, but she just cannot help it. Shaking uncontrollably, she looks over the side. Her lungs *burn* from the searing, rising heat, as she *gasps* at the sight below her.

The rock spires they are making their way over, look like *twisted* and misshapen rocky cones, their fine points *vanishing* into the massive lake of lava *thousands* of feet below them. The sight makes her dizzy.

“How come the spires aren’t *melting?* Or... or *are* they?” she says to herself with a shudder. Just then, she sees one of the many spires *collapse* in the distance, as the hundreds of stacked boulders comprising the spire, tumble down several *thousand* feet before striking the molten lava lake below. Amanda tries to swallow, but there is no *moisture* in her mouth.

Thian shakes his head hard to get his sweat drenched hair out of his face, covering Amanda with a *stream* of spray. She cringes and *instinctively* reaches up and wipes her eyes with her sleeve.

She can see *much* clearer now, but almost wishes she could not. Everywhere she looks, it is *raining* fire-falls and *glowing* cavern walls. Feeling somewhat faint from the heat, she turns her head slightly to see three *more* of the very tall rocky spires collapse and tumble into the fiery

lake below, each *twisting* and *breaking* the tracks which they had supported, leaving the tracks bent and broken, pointing to the molten abyss below.

As her cart suddenly veers to the left, something catches Amanda's eyes and she glances back down. Her jaw falls *fully* open and her eyes almost *pop* out of her skull. Amanda shakes her head as though to clear it, squeezing her eyes shut, then reopening them. Looking back down, she gasps. She is too *stunned* to speak, and while trembling, reaches over and taps Thian on the shoulder, making him *jump*. He has been facing forward, too *frightened* to look over the side himself again.

Thian turns his frightened face to Amanda, who is still looking down over the side of her cart, with a stunned expression she stutters, "Rock... fire... *people*... down... Thian, look *down*!"

Thian tries to swallow but, like Amanda, there is no moisture left. He does not want to look down, but as he sees Amanda turn for a brief moment to look at him with shock and *wonder* in her eyes, then turns back to the side of the cart, and leans to look over his side.

Amanda quickly wipes her eyes on her sleeve to get the stinging sweat out of them. She stares in disbelief at the unbelievable sight below. *Hundreds* of glowing and flaming rock formations in the rough form of *people*, are moving around on *red* hot glowing rock bridges! Most are carrying large *flaming* rocks in their own *flaming* rock hands!

The cavern begins to narrow quickly as Amanda looks up and forward, just in time to go *completely* ridged.

More than a dozen of the flaming *rock* people are moving across a blazing stone bridge just to her right. She knows Thian has seen them too, because he lets out a *terrified* cry of surprise, as do the others behind her.

Amanda leans *hard* against Thian as the cart speeds past the strange *fiery* rock creatures. They have an almost square, *rough* rocky head, short neck, *huge* rough flaming rock chest, and two flaming *arms* and legs. Deep, *slanting* red glowing slits, like *hot* coals, are where their *eyes* should be. They have a rock *chunk* for the nose, chin and ears, and a jagged and *crumbly* looking mouth.

The creatures have all stopped walking, and have turned to look at the ancient cart as it speeds by.

Amanda, Thian and the others all *spin* in their seats to look back over their shoulders at the fire creatures. The creatures are placing rocks on, and *within* some of the crumbling spires. This is happening all throughout the huge glowing cavern.

As Amanda turns to face the front again, she whispers to herself, "They... they're *fixing* those crumbling spires. They're like, like *maintenance* people. But, no, not *people*... flaming rock-*fire* people! Oh my *God*!"

The cart turns away from the side of the cavern where the rock people are, and heads out further into the vastness of the glowing cavern.

The cart makes a sudden drop, scaring the *begebbbers* out of everyone, as they see the lava lake come *screaming* up at them. The tracks they are whipping down make an arching curve to the left, then the cart straightens out and they begin rising quickly at a slight angle.

Amanda is looking over the side of the cart, watching dozens of fire people carrying the flaming rocks across the many glowing rock bridges. She looks far above her to the right, some way in front of her. She *gasps*, burning her lungs, as she sees one of the flaming rock bridges *collapse*, headed toward the fiery lake below, sending a rock person *tumbling* down after it.

The rock person lets go of its flaming boulder and begins *flailing* its arms and legs, as the flames on its body rises high into the surrounding air. Amanda watches in disbelief as the rock

person drops quickly and is almost at the level of her cart, though quite some distance in front of her.

Amanda *whips* her wand out of its holster, and with her eyebrows furrowed, aims her wand and yells “Ascendo!”

The falling rock person’s descent slows until it becomes stationary, though he is still flailing. Amanda moves her wand up, seeing the rock person rise. She raises her wand quickly and the rock person *shoots* up through the air and toward a rock ledge holding several other rock people on it, *all* of whom stopped when they heard the bridge collapse. In a moment, as Amanda’s cart turns and is heading toward the same ledge, Amanda lowers the rock person onto it, where it quickly looks around, *clearly* surprised.

The rock people point to Amanda as her cart quickly nears the ledge, now running parallel to it. In a moment, her cart passes fifty feet from the ledge and the staring rock people.

As she approaches, all the rock people *bow* low. As she passes, she and the others look back over their shoulders to see them all rise, the one Amanda had saved, giving a kind of wave, Amanda, still stunned, gives a small wave back. She returns her wand to its holster, as the cart makes another turn back out over the rising heat of the lava lake.

About to pass out from the severe *heat* and excitement, she notices that they are rapidly approaching the end of this *huge* glowing cavern, where there is a hole in the wall up ahead. Dizzy, head beginning to bob, moving *in* and out of consciousness, the cart shoots into the tunnel and *everything* goes black.

It is *wonderfully* cool in the dark tunnel, and Amanda feels her *breath* returning to her. She shakes her head to clear it. Amanda is about to turn, to see if Thian is alright, when the cart shoots *straight* up into total darkness, making everyone scream.

They again find themselves being whipped *right* and left, *up* and down, turning on their side, making *loop* after frightening loop, some *forward* loops, some backward. Their stomachs are now in their *throats*. They have all *thrown* up so many times on this ride, there is nothing *left* to throw up!

The cart shoots straight up again in the total darkness, and continues for almost a *full* minute before straightening out and traveling once again horizontally.

Amanda leans to the side, yelling to Thian over the noise of the wheels clacking on the ancient rusted tracks, “Is that *light* up ahead again Thian? Do *you* see it too?”

Thian squints into the darkness ahead of them and, sure enough, there *is* a growing pinprick of dim bluish light. “Yeah, I *do* see something! I hope it’s the *end* of this ride... I’ve had *quite* enough excitement for *now* thank you!”

Amanda cannot help but laugh, which instantly makes her feel somewhat better.

The light grows brighter and larger, until Amanda can clearly see that it *is* the end of the tunnel, where the tracks enter a dimly glowing cavern.

In a few more moments, the carts rapidly begin to slow, everyone feeling themselves leaning forward due to the rapid breaking. They slow to a crawl just as the carts reach the end of the tunnel, then slowly roll into the cavern. This small cavern looks *very* much like the one they had originally left from, *including* what looks to be a solid silver spiral staircase leading up to... who knows *what*!

The carts come to a stop, but they are all shaking too hard to get out. Everyone is still crying, even though they have no *tears* left, but there is also a mixture of nervous *laughter* and sniffles.

Amanda, trying to swallow, slowly turns to Thian, “Are you okay?” He looks at her and says, “Yeah. Well, I *think* so. If my *heart* doesn’t explode!” Then pulling the shirt away from his body

says, "But I'm afraid I *really* need a change of clothes... I'm *soaked* to the bone and I've got *vomit* all over me."

Amanda smiles wiping her face, "You're not the *only* one! I'm *drenched* in sweat too, and, uh, well, I don't remember *how* many times I threw up." They both laugh. Amanda then turns around to see if Tianna and Sadie are okay, which they are, but covered in sweat and not only their own vomit, but from Thian's and Amanda's too. What a mess!

The four of them gather their things from the trunk, then get out of the cart on wobbly legs, all of them in soaked and *vomit*-covered clothing. *They* are not alone either. Tia, Anastasia and *Cassandra* are in the same shape. Gathering just outside the carts, finding that everyone is okay, they all laugh nervously, but still scared. Slipping on their packs, they look around a little.

"I can't *wait* to take a bath and have a change of *clothes*!" Thian says looking around. Sniffing loudly, his nose running from all the crying, he continues, "What's that *horrible* smell?" After a moment of looking around, he lifts his arm and puts his nose near his arm pit. "Oh... it's *okay*... it's just *me*." Everyone howls, as they all walk off after him, their soaked clothing sticking to their bodies, everyone still wiping the vomit from their faces. Anastasia and Cassandra, being in the rear during the ride, have been *covered* in the vomit from everyone else, and their hair and faces are thick with chunks of, well, whatever, and dripping onto the cavern floor.

It takes about ten minutes to climb these silver stairs. On their way up, they are all excitedly talking about the ride and what they had seen - *especially* the *fire-rock* people. None of them can believe they had actually seen them, and never *imagined* that such creatures really existed. They kept talking about how Amanda *saved* the one that had fallen, and just could *not* believe she had reacted so quickly. Everyone else was just too *scared* to even move. The usual *talkative* Cassandra is the most quiet of all of them. She is still *quite* shaken and trying to compose herself.

When they reach the top of the staircase, they step out and around to the sides. They are once again in what appears to be the inside of a hollowed out tree. No door is to be seen anywhere.

Amanda, looking at the smooth glass-like interior, holds up her arms and says, "Keltor!" Nothing appears to happen. Looking startled, she is about to try again when Cassandra says, "Hey, *look*, behind us!"

A faint blue image of an arched door is clearly shining. Amanda walks around the stairs, then over to the glowing arch. Holding her arms up she says, "Orathian!" The door pops open, swinging outward about an inch. Looking a little nervous, Amanda says, "Okay, get your *wands* out. I have *no* idea where we are, or *what* we may find, but there's only one way to find out."

Amanda draws her own wand, swallows hard and takes a steadying breath. She looks to the others. They have their wands at the ready, and all nod back to her. Chewing her lower lip for another moment, looking the door up and down, she takes one last steadying breath, lets it out and *shoves* the door open.

There are *gasps* from everyone as their *jaws* drop.

## At The Pond

[To TOC](#)

Amanda steps out and to the side, to let the others through. Taking several steps forward, feeling the cool night air gently blowing against her, she moves a strand of hair away from her eyes, taking in the view before her.

There is a very large, moonlit pond glistening in the silver-blue of the huge moon, as a gentle breeze makes little waves slap against the sandy water's edge. There are *lots* of various sized reeds around the pond, many of which look like some odd form of *cattail*, which Amanda had seen back on the earth realm. The difference here though, is that the reeds are *glowing*, some glowing various shades of blue, others shades of green. Many are in shades of *lavender* and *pinks*.

There are *thousands* of fire-bugs flitting around the pond, darting in and out between the reeds, and *dancing* deep into the surrounding forest trees all around them and the pond. The sight is *breathhtaking*. They all stand completely mesmerized for several moments.

"Thian?" Amanda asks in a whisper. "Do you..."

"Uh huh."

"Can you *believe*..."

"Uh-uh."

They all walk about twenty-five feet to a break in the reeds and look at the shimmering pond.

Tia says in awe, "The *fish* are glowing too. *Look!*" pointing into the rippling water.

As Amanda changes position to get a better look, she inhales deeply with a huge smile. Sure enough, they all see various sized fish *glowing* light shades of blues, *pinks* and lavender.

After a moment, everyone begins to laugh and look around, breathing in the cool, clean night air. Amanda walks back to the huge pine-like tree they have come out of, and holding up her arms says, "Neldor!" The door slams closed and the faint blue outline of the door fades, until nothing but the rough bark is left showing.

Amanda turns around and sees Thian taking off his boots.

"Thian?" Tianna asks, "What *are* you doing?"

"Are you *kidding*?" Thian says with a huge grin. "I'm gonna *dive* in and get *clean*, *that's* what I'm gonna do! I'm sure as *heck* not gonna continue with my clothes soaked in stinky *sweat* and *vomit* all over me! Besides, I *gotta* see what those fish look like *under* water!"

They all laugh. Tianna says, "Oh, well, then *I'm* with you. I feel really *icky* too. Why don't we *all* have a dip to clean up and cool off? Then we can *dry* off and have a look around."

Everyone agrees, dropping their traveler's packs and brooms, then slip out of their boots. As Thian wades into the water, he lets out a little cry saying, "By the *Oak* and *Ash* this water's *cold*! Feels pretty *good* though actually... come on in and *splash* for a while."

The others laugh as they all wade in too. Soon, they are splashing and laughing, having a *great* time. Amanda, now a very good swimmer, dives deep and marvels at the softly glowing fish all around her, lighting the pond.

After they spend about half an hour splashing around in the clear water of the old pond, they make their way out. Using their newly learned *drying* spell that Sadie taught them, they all dry off and have a good *laugh* looking at each other *steaming* in the cool night air.

"Why don't we mount up, fly around for a while and see if we..." Amanda turns and looks directly at Sadie, "can *spot* anything?"

“That sounds like *fun*!” Sadie says walking back to her pack and broom. “Looks like a *beautiful* night for flying too.”

They all go back, put on their packs, mount their brooms and kick into a hover.

“Which way should we go though?” Cassandra asks looking around.

“Well, why not start directly in front of us?” Tianna suggests, looking at the base of the mountain about a mile away. “Then, fly *left* for half an hour, then back and go the *other* way for about the same length of time, then *turn* in for the night. What do *you* say Amanda?”

“Oh, uh... well, *sure*, sounds good to me. Let’s go!” Amanda is still having a hard time getting used to being asked *her* opinion, with people actually *listening* to her - as well as being looked to as some sort of leader. But she *likes* it, and really feels like she is part of something *special*.

With that, they head straight ahead for the base of the mountain. When they get to the base, they hover about five feet above the ground. Sadie is looking intently at the mountain, while Thian, Tia and Tianna watch her with interest. Cassandra and Anastasia look to one another with confused expressions, then Cassandra asks, “What are you *looking* at? There’s nothing *there* but... *mountain*. I don’t see anything.”

Sadie says as she continues to stare at the mountain, “This isn’t working for some reason. Maybe it’s too *dark* or something. Maybe I need some *contrast* to make out any difference, though I don’t know *why*.”

“Difference?” Anastasia asks looking to the others. “*What* difference?”

Ignoring the question, Amanda says, “Yeah, I think it *may* be too dark here in the shadow of the mountain to see much tonight. We may have to wait and look *harder* in the morning when it’s light. But, since we’re here, let’s continue with the plan anyway. Maybe we’ll get *lucky* and find some *cave* opening or something.”

They head off again, flying for half an hour down the left side of the mountain, back to where they had started, then half an hour to the right. Discouraged at not having found anything, they return to the pond to set up camp for the night.

Thian opens his travelers pack and takes out a small can. He walks some distance away, then sets the small three inch diameter, by one inch thick can on the ground and pops off the top.

“What are you doing Thian?” Amanda asks as she steps over to him looking down at the little can.

Thian says, “Well, you don’t want to sleep on the *ground* do you? It can get pretty cold and *damp* at night in the forest you know? *Especially* near water... can get *foggy* too.”

“But, uh, what does that little *can* have to do with it?” Amanda asks looking puzzled.

Anastasia and Cassandra walk over and are looking down at the little can as well. They also look at Thian with puzzled expressions.

“*Snippens*! Haven’t you *ever* used Instant *Tent*, or Instant *Cabin* before?” Thian asks as Tia, Tianna and Sadie come over to see what is going on.

“Instant... *what*?” Sadie asks looking puzzled along with the others.

“By the *moons*,” Thian says shaking his head with a laugh. “Haven’t *any* of you ever gone *camping* before?”

“Well, *yeah*, lots of times,” Amanda says looking to Thian. “And we *always* took our tent or sleeping bags with us - and, uh, not in a little *can* either. Tents are pretty *big* you know, and *heavy* too. Heck, even a one *person* tent couldn’t possibly fit in...” Looking back down to the little can, “in... *that*!”

Tianna laughs, “Well, you’d be *surprised* what could fit in there. Thian, what did you bring?”

“Well, I wasn’t sure what we might need, or *where* we might be going, or for how long. So, I decided to bring both my four person *tent*, like we all used when we went camping with...” Thian’s smile fades and he looks down at the ground.

“When you, mom, *Tianna* and I used to go camping,” Tia says beginning to tear up.

“Yeah. Sorry,” Thian says quietly.

“You mean that you have a *four* person tent in that little *can*?” Anastasia asks.

“What? Oh, *no*, no! This one isn’t a tent...it’s a *cabin*,” Thian says with a slight smile returning to his face, as he sees Tia wipe her eyes and begin to smile as well.

“A *cabin*?!” Sadie asks with her mouth hanging open. “Are you *kidding*?”

“Well... let’s *see*!” Thian says with a good laugh. “We all need to move back about five feet or so. Well... *go* ahead, move *back* a little.” Thian motions with his arms.

With that, Thian bends back down and rotates the red arrow on the can, so it points directly *away* from them. He then stands and looks around at the nearby trees, judging distances. He nods to himself and takes his place with the others, facing the little can on the ground, the pond off to one side about fifty feet away.

Thian draws his wand, smiles at Tia and Tianna, then with a flick of his wand says, “*Immuto Teaconna!*”

Amanda, Sadie, Anastasia and Cassandra all *gasp* and cry out in surprise, as right before their eyes, the can begins to *smoke* and bubble, as smoky mist begins to spread out and rise. In a few moments, the mist begins to *morph* into the wavering shape of a cabin, becoming more distinctive, and begins to turn solid. In another few moments, a *full* sized cabin forms from the tiny can, rising, and growing larger by the second, stretching out away from them, finally turning into a *solid*, fully assembled Log cabin.

There is a closed door facing them, and Amanda, *completely* stunned, just points and stutters, “It’s... how... *huge*!” She steps slowly back and to the side, to look around the side of the cabin.

The others follow her, Thian, Tianna and Tia giggling.

As Amanda steps around the side, she sees several *wonderfully* curving windows. Movement catches her eyes and she looks up to see *smoke* drifting from a curving brick chimney, the smoke wafting *gently* in the night air as the stars twinkle in a dark velvet sky. Her jaw drops. “A... brick chimney? And *smoke*?”

Anastasia, Sadie and Cassandra have their mouths open as they follow Amanda to one of the large, curving *leaves* and vine shaped glass windows.

“Holy *cow*!” Amanda says to no one in particular. “It’s... it’s full of *furniture*! And, are those other *rooms* back there? Oh... my... *God*!”

She turns as Thian, Tia and Tianna break into laughter. The others begin laughing too. “Come *on*!” Amanda says with excitement, walking back toward the front, “I wanna see *inside*!”

They go back to the door, where Thian is standing with his hand on the doorknob. “Welcome to your little home *away* from home!” He pulls the door open and the girls step through.

Amanda once again inhales sharply as she takes several steps inside. They have stepped into a rather large room, with two very *large* couches and five very large, *fluffy* and comfortable looking chairs. Several tables are arranged around, or near the couches and chairs. There are several tall, curved and *twisting* crystals standing near the couches. They are about fourteen inches in diameter and about five feet tall, mounted on carved wooden bases.

As Amanda looks at the *roaring* fire in the fireplace, her eyes drift up over the fireplace mantle. There she sees what looks to be two fishing poles of some kind, mounted to the brick chimney stack.

Tianna steps forward pulling her wand. She points it at one of the tall crystals near a couch and says, "Lumino Crystia." The tall crystal *instantly* begins to glow, emitting a soft light as though from a sixty-watt lamp.

There are oohs and aahs from the others, as Tianna sets the glow spell on several other crystals as well. The cabin is now *awash* in soft light, and warmed from the fire in the fireplace.

"Wait till you see the *kitchen*!" Tia laughs.

"The... the *kitchen*?" Cassandra says half in a daze.

Tianna laughs and says, "*Come* on, take a look."

Tianna casts a spell at the *ceiling* glow crystals, and the kitchen comes to life. The kitchen is *fully* stocked. The stove has a *Wizitched* smooth top glow stone surface, with an *oven* that has *infrared* emitting crystal slices and combination *vibratory* crystals, which Amanda later learns works something like a microwave oven.

There is a *double*, polished marble sink, and all *marble* counter tops. The island in the middle of the kitchen, even has a pot of beautiful *flowers* on it. Amanda steps up to what looks like hand polished wooden cabinets and opens one of the doors.

"Jumpin' *Skeeters*!" Anastasia says with a laugh. "Look at all that *canned* food!" She steps to another cabinet door and opens it. "And look! Loafs of *bread*, crackers and... are those *cookies*?"

Everyone laughs. They have a great time looking through the cabinets, cupboards, drawers and the *fully* loaded pantry.

"Come on, I wanna show you the *bathroom*, then *your* rooms too!" Thian says with a huge grin. He is *really* enjoying everyone's stunned reactions.

The bathroom is *huge*. Double sinks, cabinets, *shower* with a large tub, a really nice toilet, drawers filled with towels and hand cloths, and *lots* and lots of toilet paper, along with *dozens* of cans of some sort, and even a *fluffy* floor mat.

They laugh as they walk down a short hall and find two very large rooms, one on each side of the cabin. Both rooms have, what to Amanda, look like two *king* size beds. There are dressers, crystal glow lamps, *extra* bedding, a walk-in closet... *everything* you could ask for. They even have a *desk*, three large very comfortable chairs, and a *couch* which has a pull-out bed.

The girls *cannot* believe it.

They are all hungry and decide to have something to eat. Thian says, "Well, as you saw in the kitchen, we have *lots* of canned and packaged stuff, but no *meat* or fresh vegetables. There *are* lots of canned veggies though. Refrigeration units were too expensive for my mom and dad to buy, when they were really young and bought this cabin. They always kept it fully stocked, at least as best they could.

"After my dad died, my mom and I would go camping from time to time, but, we never had enough money to get a *Wizitched* refrigerator. We *tried* to restock everything after each trip, but it's been a long time since I've been in here, so, I don't know what we might be missing. Everything's a little, old... but..."

Amanda walks to Thian and gives him a big hug. "Are you *kidding*? This is *great*! Oh my gosh, now *this* is *camping*! Magic can't *touch* *Wizitch*, *that's* for sure!"

Thian is not sure what kind of animals may be around, and decides that fish would be the easiest and quickest meat to get. Amanda does not like fish, other than *tuna*, which she cannot find a can of in the kitchen, and *no* one else seems to know what tuna *is*. But Amanda does find something that tastes like *peanut* butter in a large jar, and finds some jars of honey too. So she makes herself a kind of *gooey* sweet sandwich, which tastes absolutely *wonderful*. She finds a

can of some kind of mixed vegetables, which to her delight, are delicious. There are several canisters of various flavored beans and teas, so she makes some tea for herself and the others.

It turns out that you need to *Wizitch* water from some source, to a *holding* tank in the back of the cabin. Tia and Tianna take care of that, while Sadie, Amanda, Cassandra and Anastasia, watch transfixed as a *stream* of water rises out of the pond, arches through the air and enters an open pipe at the rear of the cabin.

Tia explains that there is a *very* advanced filtration system which purifies the water. It seems that the waste from the *potty* is *Wizitchly* vaporized, so there is nothing to empty or wash out. The sink, *shower* and tub water is also somehow vaporized. None of them understand how all this works, they just know it does.

Thian grabs one fishing pole and hands Tianna the other. They then head out to the pond to try their luck. The others busy themselves in the kitchen preparing the rest of the dinner, each to their own liking.

About half an hour later, Thian steps through the kitchen door. He proudly holds up his two, *small*, slightly glowing *blue* and lavender fish. Tianna then steps in beside him, holding up a string of *ten* fairly *large* glowing and *wriggling* fish. Everyone laughs, looking at the two of them grinning and standing side by side with the dripping fish.

Thian looks at his two puny fish, then at Tianna's string of *huge* ones and says somewhat embarrassed, "Well... *she* got the *good* pole you know!" They all laugh. Thian once again looks at the large string Tianna is holding, then back at his two twitching little ones. He smiles after a moment, then breaks into laughter along with the rest of them.

Thian and Tianna go out back to clean the fish, then Tia prepares and cooks them. Tia is a *fabulous* cook. Anastasia and Cassandra set the table, and soon, everything is ready. Everyone sits and has a *marvelous* dinner and afterward, cleans up, and heads into the living room by the fire to relax. They spend the next couple hours going over all the things that have happened on their very first day out.

"Well, if *this* is what we got on day *one*..." Anastasia says with a laugh, "and we haven't even *found* the entrance yet... I can't *wait* to see what happens *tomorrow*!" They all laugh.

After a few more minutes of chatting, they all decide it is time for bed so they can get an early start in the morning. They all take turns taking a nice hot bath, then the girls split up and go to their rooms, while Thian takes the pull out couch near the fire in the living room.

Thian looks around the cabin with a smile, pulls the covers up to his neck, waves his wand and puts out the glow lamps.

Rolling over, he cuddles down, eyes closed listening to the crackling of the fireplace. In no time, he and the others are fast asleep.

## The Glass Puzzle

[To TOC](#)

Early the next morning, Thian is awakened by Sadie, who gently shakes him. The girls had let him sleep in, and have already made breakfast. They had found some “*Instant Dehydrated Cucuteo Eggs*,” which Amanda learns you only need to add water to, and they actually return to an original egg... *shell* and all. They have eggs, re-hydrated *Kiki* strips, bread and cookies. *Lots* of cookies.

After everyone cleans up, Amanda puts all the trash into the Wizitch vaporizer, closes the door and pushes the button. A red crystal *flashes* several times, then goes off as a green one glows. Amanda opens the door and is *surprised* to see that the inside of the large bin is absolutely *spotless*, the cans and empty glass *bottles* gone too. Thian had told her that it vaporized *everything* but what was recyclable. Those items are Wizitched to the nearest recycling facility, *regardless* of how faraway it may be.

Everyone goes potty, then gathers in the living room. Thian asks, “Anybody need any cans of ‘Instant *Toilet Paper*’? We might as well stock our packs before leaving. I mean, we really don’t know what we’ll find, and I *really* don’t like to be without toilet paper. Oh, and I’ve got like *thirty* ‘Instant Outhouses’ too. Some guy gave my dad like *two-hundred* of ‘em, in exchange for some work he did at their factory in some city, before he and mom came to... well, where I come from. The guy didn’t have any money at the time, since his business wasn’t doing so well, so they paid my dad in ‘Instant *Toilet Paper*’ and ‘Instant *Outhouses*’. He sold a lot of ‘em, but kept a lot here in the cabin too. These are all that’s left. The others were stored in the house, which, well...”

“Wait a minute!” Amanda says with a laugh. “You mean to *tell* us, that you have *toilet paper*... in a can *too*? And an actual *outhouse*... in a can? Like the *cabin*?”

Thian looks at the stunned faces on Amanda, Sadie, Anastasia and Cassandra, then at the smiles on Tia and Tianna. Thian laughs. “Well, what do *you* do when you’re out someplace in the *woods* or something, and you have to... uh, go *potty*? I know *some* people go behind some bush or tree, and use *leaves* and stuff, but, personally... I prefer some *privacy* and something that won’t scrape my *butt* raw. And once, mom said that, when I was *really* little, and she and I were out camping, and *forgot* to bring toilet paper, I used some kind of *poisonous* leaf for toilet paper, and, well, my *butt* broke out in a *horrible* itching rash! Dang near scratched my *ass* off. Since then, I take a can of Instant Toilet Paper with me *wherever* I go!”

They all howled.

Thian turns his head slightly, bats his eyes, and while patting at his face says in a higher girly voice, “For *my* sensitive skin...I prefer the *nicely* scented, *extra* soft toilet paper, if you don’t *mind*.”

They laugh so hard they are in tears. Amanda holds a stitch in her side as Thian tosses his hair back like in a beauty commercial.

After wiping his eyes on his sleeve, Thian continues. “Well, by the looks on your *faces*, I’m guessing you’ve never *seen* Instant Toilet Paper, or an Instant *Outhouse* either. Here, let me show you.”

After trotting out of the living room, they hear Thian rummaging around under one of the bathroom sinks. In a couple of minutes he comes back with his hands full of very thin cans, about three inches in diameter.

Dumping the handful of cans on a chair, he takes one of the cans and puts it on the living room floor, then takes the lid off.

“Uh, *Tia*, maybe you better show ‘em how these work. For some reason, about a *third* of the time I do it, I set *fire* to the toilet paper. The outhouse works... *most* of the time... although there was that *one* time, when mom had to use a cascading *water* spell to put that one out... but anyway, I always keep a couple *extras* with me, *just* in case.”

Amanda, Tia and Tianna laugh, knowing Thian’s mishaps with his wand, and his uncanny ability to set *fire* to things without meaning to.

Tia pulls out her wand as she steps to the little can. With a wave she says, “*Tacume sa’* soft.” There is a small *flash* from the can, and when Amanda looks back, there is a *fully* packed, clear package with *eighteen* large rolls of soft toilet paper.

Everyone laughs and has to *squeeze* the package to be sure it is real. Tia waves her wand again and says, “*Incantu!*” There is another flash, and *this* time when Amanda looks back, the package has re-packed *flat* into the tiny can.

Tia puts the lid on and stands up. “Now, let me show you the ‘Instant *Outhouse*’ - you’ll *love* this! But, let’s move outside for a minute to do this one.” They all head outside.

Tia walks a short distance and taking a different can from Thian, pops the top off and sets the can on the ground. Smiling she waves her wand and says, “*Tacume O’.*”

Everyone *jumps*, when with a flash, the can begins to bubble, then *overflows* with a brownish liquid. It spreads out for a few feet, *then* begins to fume. The fumes thicken into a reddish brown *smoky* mist. It continues to swirl and rise, getting thicker with each moment, until in the last few seconds, it *morphs* and changes form. Amanda’s jaw drops. There stands a *wonderfully* carved wooden outhouse, with the typically carved flying *dragon* on the upper part of the door. The outhouse is about *seven* feet tall and about six feet square, with a crooked *peaked* roof.

“That is *soooo* cool!” Sadie says laughing along with everyone else. “They don’t have *these* where I come from!”

“Ahhhh, but *that’s* not the best *part!*” Tianna says stepping to the door. “Take a look *inside.*”

Tianna opens the door and everyone gasps. Amanda immediately steps to the side and looks around the left side of the outhouse. Her jaw drops further. Walking all around the outhouse, with the others following her, nothing looks different outside at all - the outhouse is still the same size. But arriving back at the door, Amanda shakes her head saying, “I can’t *believe* this! Can we go inside?”

Thian is laughing so hard he can hardly stand. “Sure, *go* ahead.”

Amanda steps through the door and into a *full* sized bathroom. There is a single marble sink and counter top, with a large drawer and *twin* cabinets below to one side. A *beautiful* mirror hangs over the sink, with a wonderfully carved wooden frame. There is a *full* sized, *Wizitched* vaporizer toilet, *plus*, a *full* sized tub and shower!

The shower curtain has a full-motion scene of a forest, with birds flying overhead and landing in the trees. There is also a beautiful and *glistening* lake, with fish jumping a ways from the shoreline. There are even towels hanging on one wall.

“But... but how is this *possible?*” Amanda asks, her mouth still hanging partly open, as are Sadie’s, Anastasia’s and Cassandra’s.

“Well, *Wizitch* of course!” Thian says looking in at the girls. “The toilet is good for about *fifty-three* flushes before you need to refill the tank with water. You can get about the same usage with the tub and shower too for some reason... well, dependent upon how long you take a shower that it. It has both *hot* and cold running water in here too. I can’t figure how they *store* all

the water in the little can, but... *they* do. And with the *advanced* Wizitch technology, the whole thing only weighs *seven*-ounces in the can. Pretty *cool* huh?"

They are all *speechless*. Once they step out, Tia returns the outhouse to the little can and hands it to Amanda, along with *two* cans of 'Instant Toilet Paper, figuring that *thirty*-six rolls should do for now.

Everyone gets an *outhouse* and two cans of 'Instant Toilet Paper'.

They go back into the cabin, put on their traveler's pack, grab their broom and go back outside, into the cool morning air.

Tianna empties the water from the cabin's holding tank. This time the water flows out of the pipe at the back of the cabin, through the air and back into the pond. She then secures the lid.

They all stand a little distance from the cabin, as Thian draws his wand. With a wave he says, "Incantu!" The huge cabin begins to smoke, morph, *shrink*, then settles and solidifies into the little can. Thian steps over, drops his pack, puts the lid on the can and puts it in a side pocket of his pack. He puts his pack on, turns and is greeted by all their smiling faces.

"I've *got* to get me one of *those*!" Anastasia says laughing. Then turning to Amanda, asks, "So, do we start off like we did yesterday? I mean, start our search... over *there*?" she asks pointing to the mountain behind them.

"Yeah, I think that's as good a place as any. Sadie? Care to lead the way?"

"Okay, *sure*, let's go."

They all mount their brooms, kick off and head for the mountain. Once there, Sadie begins her scanning of the mountain's base. They end up flying the same route they did yesterday, with the *same* result... *no* sign of any entrance.

"I just *don't* understand it!" Amanda says as they hover at their starting point at the mountain's base. "Why didn't we find anything?"

"Maybe it really *doesn't* exist after all," Cassandra says looking to Anastasia. "Maybe it really *is* a myth you know?"

"I don't think so Cassa," Anastasia says looking at the mountain. "Amanda, are you *sure* the entrance is here at the *base* of the mountain, and not, well, further *up*? I mean, I've read where *most* entrances are actually a ways *up* a mountain. You know... so if there's *rock* slides and stuff, the entrance isn't covered up or buried."

Amanda looks at Anastasia for a moment, thinking back to when she had arrived on the realm of *The Deep Forest Elves*. She *had* come out on a ledge of the mountain, and it *had* been a good way up. When they arrived *here*, on *The Realm of The Witches*, they *also* came out on a ledge from *that* mountain, roughly the *same* distance up its side.

"You know..." Amanda says now looking up the mountainside. "I think you might be *right*." After looking up the mountainside, to about the height she remembers arriving *twice* before, she scans left, then right. Almost immediately, she sees something that catches her eyes. "Follow me, and Sadie, keep your *eyes* open okay?" Sadie nods.

They all fly up the mountainside to the right, Sadie sticking right beside Amanda, as the others follow behind. Amanda leads them to what looks to be a slight outcropping. They are about thirty feet from it when Sadie yells, "*Flash* in the pan! *Flash* in the pan!"

Amanda, Sadie and the others, come to a hover in front of a ledge which leads back to the solid face of the mountain.

"What's a... *flash* in the pan?" Cassandra asks looking puzzled.

“Huh?” Sadie says looking startled. “Oh, I always *liked* a place back home called *Flash In The Pan*. It’s a restaurant. I, uh, I’ve been *trying* to remember the name of the place all day.” She turns and smiles at Amanda, who smiles back and nods.

“Well... that’s *great* Sadie!” Cassandra says sarcastically as everyone lands and dismounts on the ledge. “But *why* are we standing *here*, looking at the mountain?”

Sadie narrows her eyes glaring at Cassandra. Tianna asks, “Can you see a way *in* Sadie?”

Anastasia and Cassandra turn to look at one another, then back to the tiny girl, who is leaning forward and *staring* at solid stone. Sadie tilts her head up, looking across an area of the stone, then down the other side.

“No, but there *is* a pathway inside that leads back and off to the left.”

“Wait! Are you *telling* us, that *she* can see through *solid* rock? No way! *Nobody* can do that!” Cassandra says curling her lips and crossing her arms.

Amanda sees Anastasia’s eyes suddenly go wide and her mouth opens slightly as she looks at Sadie, who catches her look and lowers her eyes. Anastasia turns to Amanda and is about to say something, when Amanda gives a subtle shake of her head, with pleading in her eyes.

Amanda knows Anastasia is a *voracious* reader, and must have figured out what *race* Sadie is from. *Cassandra* does not have a clue. Amanda gives a slight tilt of her head at Cassandra who is looking back over the ledge, to the valley below. Anastasia looks at Cassandra, back to Amanda and nods her understanding.

“Of *course* she can’t see through solid *stone*!” Anastasia says with a forced laugh. “She’s just *playing*. I bet you guys *knew* to look for some kind of ledge, and that there’s *supposed* to be a... a hidden *door* with a passage leading off to the left... right?”

Thian laughs and says, “Well, *yeah*, of course.”

“Then why did we *waste* our time last night and this *morning*, looking at the *stupid* base then?” Cassandra asks hotly turning to face them.

“Because... uh, there are *two* ways in,” Tia lies crossing her fingers behind her back. “One at the *base* of the mountain, and one, uh, somewhere *up* the mountain. We looked for the one at the bottom, um, because...”

“Because, look how *tall* this mountain is!” Thian says pointing up the mountain to its top, which is at least twenty-five thousand feet or more above their heads. “Heck, it could have taken us *weeks*, maybe *months*, to cover all *this*, and only in the width we flew at the *base*!”

“Yeah,” Amanda says nodding her thanks to Thian and Tianna. “Then I just started looking for something that *looks* like ledges, and, well, I saw *this* one. We *know* there’s a hidden doorway at the entrance. So, um, let’s see if this is it, and if we can get in. We *might* get lucky. If not, we’ll move on looking for other ledges.”

Cassandra narrows her eyes, staring at Amanda for a few moments, then shrugs.

Amanda turns, clears her throat, raises her arms and says, “Orathian!” There is a *clank... clank... clank* sound, which Amanda recognizes from the many other doors she has opened with this ancient, universal unlocking and opening spell.

In a moment, a section of *solid* stone begins to swing back into the mountain, revealing a cavern inside. The cavern floor clearly goes back about twenty feet and bends off to the left and disappears.

“Jumpin’ *Skeeters*!” Anastasia says with her eyes wide, a smile spreading across her face.

“You can say *that* again,” Cassandra says with a laugh.

They all enter, then Amanda whispers, “Get your *wands* out and light ‘em up.”

Once Amanda and the others have their wands emitting the soft blue glow, Amanda turns back and faces the door. Holding her arms up, she speaks, “Neldor!” The massive rock door swings shut and they can all hear the locks *snapping* into place.

Anastasia and Cassandra look *scared* to death, but seeing that the others are heading off toward the back of the cavern, they nervously follow a short distance behind.

The pathway winds first to the left, then to the right a short distance beyond that. It again winds left, then begins turning to what seems to Amanda, to be leading *directly* into the mountain.

As they make their way around a curve, an ancient, *perfectly* round door set into the rock wall appears. *Everyone* inhaling sharply, come to a stop in front of it. There is raised lettering on the door. Amanda recognizes it right away. It is *Theban*, the Witch’s alphabet Sadie had read on the tongue, at the face they had first found on this realm.

This is what the door looks like:



The writing looks like this:

ᲕᲗᲚᲙᲗᲚᲙ ᲕᲗ ᲕᲗᲚᲙᲗ ᲕᲗᲚᲙᲗᲚᲙᲗ ᲕᲗᲚᲙᲗ  
ᲕᲗᲚᲙ ᲕᲗ ᲕᲗᲚᲙᲗᲚᲙ ᲕᲗ ᲕᲗᲚᲙᲗ Ვ ᲕᲗᲚᲙᲗᲚᲙ  
ᲕᲗᲚᲙ ᲕᲗᲚᲙ ᲕᲗᲚᲙᲗᲚᲙ

Amanda puts a hand on Sadie’s shoulder, as Tia steps up and rests her hand on Amanda’s. Sadie looks at the text, “It says, ‘Welcome to...’”

Amanda gets a *jolt* from her necklace, followed by the odd *buzzing* she gets when someone speaks a language she does not know.

Suddenly Amanda can not only understand Theban, but she can *speak*, read and *write* it too. The odd writing seems to *morph* and change, right before her eyes, and she can read it as *easily* as her native English.

Amanda continues reading out loud, cutting Sadie off. “*Witch* mountain. Should thou be worthy to enter...”

Tia feels a jolt, like a *static* discharge course through her, and she too, can *instantly* read Theban, although there is a slight *fuzzy* buzzing in her head. She continues reading out loud, cutting Amanda off, “...a *puzzle* you must solve.” Tia then turns to look into the stunned faces of Amanda, Sadie, Tianna and the others.

“Sis? How did you *do* that?” Tianna asks, a look of wonder and surprise on her face.

“I... I *don’t* know. I felt a kind of, well, *shock* I guess. Then, uh, the writing *moved* around some, and I could *read* the writing just like *Elvish*. But...” Looking back at the writing, she reaches up and touches her temple, shaking her head.

“Do... do you hear a *fuzzy* sound? When you *look* at the writing?” Amanda asks in surprise.

“Yeah, I *do*... how’d you know that?”

Amanda looks into Tia’s questioning eyes, then looks to Sadie. “Sadie was the *only* one who could read the ancient script. I had *my* hand on her shoulder when she started reading, and *I* got a shock, like I did when I first knew how to speak *Elvish*... and like when I touched Loki’s *dad* and could suddenly understand Dwarvish, *remember*?”

“I *always* get that fuzzy sound when doing *anything* other than in my own...” Then looking at Anastasia and Cassandra, “uh, my own realm, um, *stuff*.”

“But why can *I* do it now?” Tia asks.

“I don’t know...,” Amanda says thoughtfully. “But, let’s *try* something okay? Everybody hold hands.”

“*Why*?” Cassandra asks suspiciously.

“Cassa, just *do* it okay,” Anastasia says grabbing Cassandra’s hand, then Tia’s.

They all hold hands. Amanda turns saying, “Okay, I want *all* of you to look at the writing and just keep *looking* at it okay?” They turn their eyes to the text. Amanda looks at the text as well and begins reading it *silently* to herself. There are instant *gasps* from the others as everyone drops hands and takes a few steps back away from Amanda.

“Slimy *wessel* worts!” Cassandra stutters. “How’d you *do* that? I... *I* can read it really easily now *too*. The *letters* moved around, changed form and...”

“Hey! *I’ve* got that fuzzy little... *buzz* when I look at the writing too! But as soon as I look away, the buzzing *stops*. *What’s* going on?”

“Amanda,” Tia says, “it looks like you can somehow, well, *transmit* to others by touch, some of the *same* abilities you have. Maybe all *we* need to do, when *you* learn another language, or maybe even some you *already* know, is just *touch* you when you’re speaking or reading them, and *we’ll* know them too! Do you think it’s *possible*?”

“Maybe.” Then turning to Anastasia and Cassandra asks, “Do either of you know Dwarvish?”

“No. We were both born in the village,” Anastasia says. “And we’ve never even *met* a dwarf. But we’ve read about them though.”

“Listen, I know this *sounds* weird,” Amanda says very excited. “But I want to *touch* you once I start speaking Dwarvish, okay?”

After a nervous hesitation, both Anastasia and Cassandra agree. Amanda begins speaking Dwarvish, and while speaking, reaches forward and places her hands on their shoulders. *Instantly* both Anastasia and Cassandra gasp and *jump* back as Amanda is still speaking.

“What... what just *happened*?” Cassandra asks looking startled. “You’re still speaking the same language, but now there’s a faint *fuzzy* buzz.”

“How about now?” Amanda asks returning to Elvish. They shake their heads. Amanda then speaks in Dwarvish.

“Yeah, now it’s *fuzzy* again,” Cassandra says. “But... you’re still speaking *Elvish*... *aren’t* you?”

“No, I’m *not*. I’m speaking *Dwarvish*. The buzz you hear is the Dwarvish being *translated* into your native language. I’ll switch back to Elvish. Any buzz *now*?”

Neither of them hears the buzzing. Amanda then asks excitedly, “Do either of you know any *other* languages?”

“Well, yeah,” Anastasia says looking first at Cassandra, then back to Amanda. “We speak Elvish, *Kolin*, Santor and the three forms of *Veha*... the languages of the *old* witches here.

“It’s really weird, but from time to time, we get people passing through our village heading to the other cities, and they *all* speak one of the three ancient witch languages. No one ever says *where* they’re from though. So, we learned those three variations so we could *sell* to them. Why?”

A huge grin spreads across Amanda’s face. She turns to look at Thian, who smiles and nods his understanding. He then takes Tia’s hand as Amanda says. “Okay, everybody hold hands. I think I need to hold *your* hand Anastasia, since you’ll be the one speaking. Okay, good. Now, Anastasia, I want you to say *anything* you want, in *all* of those languages you just told us about okay? Do them *one* at a time.”

Not fully understanding, but doing it anyway, Anastasia begins to speak. The eyes on Thian, Tia, *Tianna* and Sadie fly wide as their mouths fall open. Anastasia stops, but Amanda tells her to keep going. In a few moments, everyone drops hands. Amanda turns to her friends and asks, “Well? Did it *work*?”

“You *bet* it did!” Thian says laughing and doing a little dance, making the others laugh too. “I can understand *and* speak Kolin, Santor and the *three* languages of the ancient witches! Listen to *this*!” Thian speaks several sentences in each of his new languages, enjoying the surprised looks on both Cassandra and Anastasia. Then, switching back to Elvish, he says, “By the *moons* Amanda, this is *really* cool!”

Cassandra and Anastasia look a little frightened of Amanda now, and both take a couple steps back, clutching at one another. Cassandra then asks, “Who... what *are* you? How did you *do* that?”

Amanda looks startled and does not know what to say.

Thian quickly says, “Well, where *we* come from, we learn *lots* of really cool stuff. Amanda is, well, in an *advanced* Wizitch class, and she, um, has learned *lots* of stuff we haven’t yet. You’d know all this stuff too, if you lived in one of the *big* cities and went to one of the really *good* Wizitch schools. Here, you said you’re *home* schooled. And *this* kind of Wizitch isn’t taught in *books* either. You have to learn it in a *class*, with someone who, uh, *you* know... someone who already *has* the abilities and can pass them on... from *touching*... or, uh, kind of like that. Anyway, it *works*, and this could come in *real* handy you know?”

“Yeah, well, let’s get this door *open* and see what’s inside,” Tianna says drawing her wand and stepping up to the door, trying to change the subject. “Let’s see what kind of a *puzzle* they’re talking about.”

With that, wands at the ready, they turn to Thian. Stepping to the door, Thian pulls on the old tarnished ring. It does not budge. Taking a step back, Thian raises his arms and says, “Orathian!” They all hear the *clank... clank... clank* of the locks disengaging. The door pops open just a little. Thian glances at the others, then grabs the ring and pulls the door open.

As they enter a large square room, it begins to glow a light blue. The walls are lined with doors. Five doors per wall, on the left, back and right. The only other things in the room, are a tall pile of glass rectangles with patterns on them, and a *huge* lined grid on the smooth and polished cavern floor. The flooring looks like *polished* white rectangular marble tiles.

The stack of glass rectangles look something like this:



“Wow... *look* at all those *doors!*” Thian says to no one in particular as his eyes scan the room. “I wonder what’s behind ‘em?”

“Well, why don’t we *open* them and find out?” Cassandra snorts standing next to one, about to open it.

“No! *Wait!*” Sadie shouts. “In ancient times, only *true* witches could read Theban *and* understand it. The witches would use elaborate *traps* to keep the... *unworthy*... from gaining access to their covens. We learned in class, that they liked to use doorways to entice the *unsuspecting* into their traps. They were *filled* with all kinds of *horrible* things... shooting *spikes*, collapsing ceilings, hidden *holes* in the pathway you fall into and are *impaled* on sharp spikes. They even have *water-well* traps...”

Sadie looks at Amanda, Thian, Tia and Tianna, whose eyes go slightly wide with understanding. “And *lots* of other stuff *too!* I think, maybe, *whatever* puzzle they’re talking about, will give us the *answer* to which door we need to take.

“Remember, only the *worthy*, meaning those who can *understand* the puzzle, will be able to pick the right door after solving the puzzle. They even used hideous *creatures* that would hide behind the doors, then kill and *eat* whoever opened them.”

Cassandra jumps away from the ancient wooden door, swallows hard as she takes a couple steps back, and turns to face the others with a very frightened expression.

“Well, *this* is interesting,” Sadie says walking to the large pile of glass rectangles. “What do you think *these* are for?”

The rest walk over and look at the large stack. Thian bends and tries to pick one of the large glass panels up. “Whoa! These things are *really* heavy! I can’t even pick *this* one up. They’re about an inch thick too.”

“Hey, this one’s got that *Theban* writing on it,” Anastasia says. “How come I can’t read it now? I did *before*.”

“Oh, don’t just *look* at the writing,” Amanda says walking over to her. “Look at it and *think* about what it says. That’s how I do it anyway. As you concentrate on *understanding* it, well, it just somehow *becomes* readable, or, you can then understand what someone’s saying an’ stuff.”

In a flash, Anastasia smiles and says, “Yeah! I *can* read it now... Wow! The letter just, like, *morphed* into a letter I can read!”

“Looks like *some* of the glass panels have a single letter on ‘em, and *some* of the panels are blank, with only some kind of *pattern* on them,” Tianna says kneeling beside the stack. She stands and looks at the large inlaid gold grid on the marble floor. “You know, I think our greeting is actually talking about a *real* puzzle - one we have to put together.

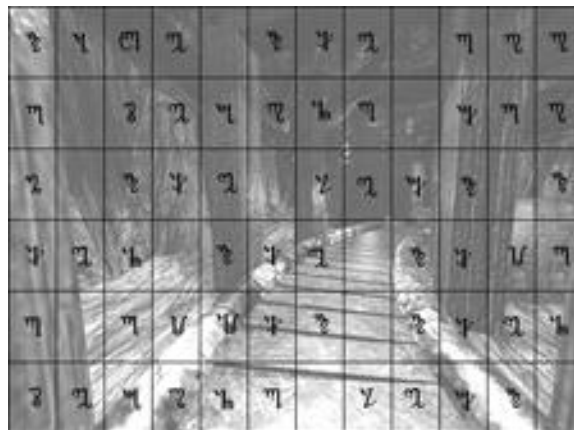
“Look at the grid on the floor. Each floor rectangle is the *same* size as one of these *glass* rectangles. I think we have to arrange all the pieces to get another message or something.”

They talk it over for a while, then decide to use their wands to move the heavy glass panels to each of the grid rectangles. They drop their traveler’s packs and brooms, and get started.

As they begin moving some of the glass pieces, Sadie says, “Our teacher said that there weren’t many people who could *do* Wizitch back in the ancient times... on *this* realm anyway. So, for the *non*-Wizitch folk, they may *never* have been able to move these heavy glass pieces, since they wouldn’t know *how* to use a wand.”

It takes almost an hour of trial and error, with lots of heated disagreements, as to where some pieces went in the process.

When the puzzle is finished, it looks like this:

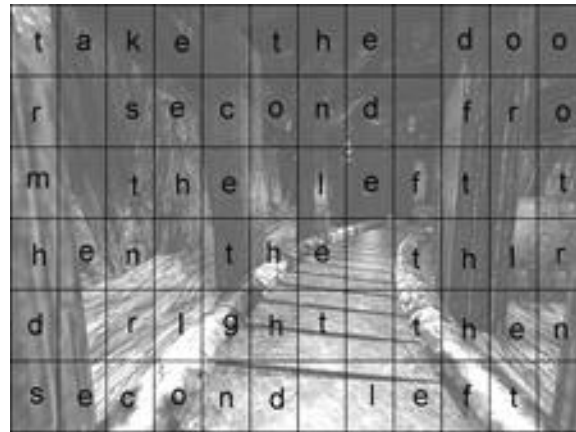


Standing back and looking at the finished picture, Sadie says, “Wow! That looks *just* like the track our *carts* were on, you know... when we got *close* to the end of the last tunnel? I remember that brass box on the right. All the panels are written in ancient Theban too. Just like the greeting was.”

“Okay everybody,” Amanda says with a smile. “Now, don’t look at the Theban as, uh, *Theban*, but concentrate on what it... *means*. You need to *concentrate* on what you want to happen before it does.”

Everyone focuses on the glass puzzle when Cassandra says with surprise, “Oh *wow*! The Theban letters just, uh, like morphed into new letters I can *read*. This is *crazy*!” Everyone begins to giggle.

The finished puzzle looks like this, as Amanda concentrates on seeing it in English:



“What’s it mean, ‘Take the door *second* from the left, then the *third* right, then second left?’” Thian asks.

“Well, it sounds to *me*, like we may find something behind *one* door,” Cassandra says pointing to the second door from the entrance to the room. “*Then*, we need to find what’s behind the *others*. Maybe then, whatever we *find* will tell us what to do next.”

“Maybe,” Tianna says walking toward the second door from the entrance. “But we won’t know until we *open* it. Grab your wands and get ready. Just in case.”

Tianna raises her arms and says, “Orathian!” The usual *clank... clank... clank* comes from around the left side of the door. The door pops open about an inch. Tianna looks to see that everyone is pointing their wands at the door, ready for whatever may be behind it. Turning to Amanda, Tianna nods. Amanda steadies herself, grips her wand tighter, and nods back. Tianna yanks the door open jumping back.

“By the *moons*!” Thian says lowering his wand. “*Doors...* along *both* sides of the pathway! Look how *many* there are! They like, *disappear* into the distance.”

“Well, I guess we know what the puzzle means *now*,” Tia says nodding her understanding. “We needed to open this *second* door from the entrance, to find these *other* doors. Now, I think it means we need to go through the *third* door on the *right* side of the path. Then...”

“We take the *second* one on the left inside the doors we’ll *probably* find in there!” Amanda says nodding with a smile.

“Wait! No...*no*...no! You’re *wrong*!” Cassandra says impatiently as everyone turns to her. “*Look!*” pointing to the doors, “There’s no *room* between these doors and the other doors in the main room. Honestly, *look!* Here in the *main* room, the doors are only like, a *foot* apart! *This* one we opened, has doors down *both* sides of the pathway inside, but if you opened one of *those*, there is only about a *foot* before you would reach the back of it. So just tell me exactly *how* there can be a *huge* monster behind them? There’s no *room*!”

Just as Tianna opens her mouth, Sadie says, “Instant Outhouses.”

Cassandra turns to Sadie and snorts, “What are you *talking* about? I said...”

“I *know* what you said,” Sadie retorts, “and I *answered* your question.”

Just as Cassandra folds her arms across her chest wearing a look of condescension, ready to say something *snide*, Sadie continues, “Thian has Instant Outhouses... and Instant Potty paper... and even an Instant *Cabin*! They’re *Wizitched*... so really *big* things can be made *very* small until you use a spell on them to return them to their normal size. I *think* that’s what’s happened here. *Remember*... *Wizitched* things can have their dimensions *changed*, so they can be made to be *bigger* or smaller, and in *this* case, compressed until you *open* the door. *That* triggers a *new* spell

and, well, *bang!* A *monster* jumps out and *eats* you! *Think* about it. It's sort of like Thian's Instant *Outhouse*. It looked *small* and square on the *outside*, but when we opened the door, it was a *lot* bigger on the inside, with a nice sink, *toilet*, and even a full sized *tub* and shower!

"You *open* that door Cassandra, and there could be *hundreds* of monsters behind it, for *miles!*"

Thian swallows hard as he looks at Sadie, then turns to Cassandra. "She's *right*. Uh, let's not plan on anything being what we expect – not *here!*"

"Well, let's grab our packs and *brooms* and see where we go from here," Thian says, walking back to where they had all dropped their packs. He picks up his pack, slips it on, then grabs his broom, looking nervously at all the doors, wondering how many creatures are behind each.

They all put their packs on, grab their brooms, and head to the open tunnel with all the doors.

Tianna steps through the doorway, and begins walking down the pathway looking at the ancient carvings on each of the doors. It is deadly quiet. Not a sound can be heard but for her boots crunching on the gravel floor, and her own nervous breathing.

The others hesitate for a moment, then nervously follow her, *Cassandra* being the last to enter, having to work up her courage. She has just walked up to *Anastasia*, about *fifteen* feet from the open doorway, when the door behind her *slams* shut, making everyone *jump* and spin around in surprise.

As *soon* as the door seals itself, a dim red glow illuminates the dirt pathway within. The ground *shakes*, as they hear what sounds like something *huge* running from somewhere *way* off behind one... or *more*... of the many doors.

There is a thundering, *crashing* sound as one of the doors bows *outward* from the impact of something huge *slamming* into it.

The kids *scream* and spin around, wands pointing at that door.

Over and *over* again, something huge *pounds* against the door as billowing *howls* scream behind the door. It sounds as though the creature is trying to *tear* its way right through the door to get to them.

A sound like *hundreds* of running feet, comes from behind a door back near the entrance, followed by *horrible* screams of *torture* and agony beyond *anything* they've ever heard. The kids spin to face the screams, everyone *shaking* uncontrollably.

In less than a second, there are *terrifying* screams, howling, *growling* and fierce pounding noises coming from every door.

Tianna and the others are all screaming, everyone *spinning* in circles, pointing their wands frantically, looking for something to come *bursting* through the dozens upon *dozens* of doors to attack them.

Tianna, after coming out of her momentary shock, runs back to the door they had entered from, and screams, "Orathian! *Orathian!*"

Nothing.

Amanda runs over screaming, "Let *me* try it! Move!" She skids to a stop in front of the door, holds her arms up and yells, "Orathian!"

Nothing.

"Oh *God*... oh Jesus, *no!* It *has* to open, it *always* works! Orathian!"

Nothing.

Amanda spins to look back down the pathway to the dozens of doors on each side. Many are *bulging* as they are repeatedly struck by something huge, followed by howls and *fierce* growling.

“Amanda! *Do* something!” Tianna yells, wand pointing first to one side of the pathway, then to the other.

“I’m *trying*, but the door won’t *open*! I don’t *know* why! It’s always worked *before*!”

“Use the *necklace*!” Tia cries. “Amanda, *use* the necklace!”

“I... I don’t know *how* yet!”

“Get *out* of the way Amanda!” Tianna yells over the din of the howling, growling, *pounding* and screaming from what sounds like *hundreds* of tortured souls. “I’m gonna *blast* it open! Everybody... *back*!”

Amanda hurries over to where the others are clustered in a circle, everyone shaking with expressions of *pure* terror. Tianna takes a few steps back from the door and fires off two quick *blasts* from her wand. They burst into *harmless* glittering sparks... inches from the door.

“By the *moons*!” Thian yells. “It’s got a *blast* shield spell on it! We’re *trapped* in here!”

“Sadie!” Tia yells over the horrifying pounding coming from the door beside her, as it bulges with each hit. “Can you see *inside* these doors?”

Anastasia and Cassandra look at one another with frightened, *questioning* expressions, then to Sadie, as Sadie cries out, “I’m... I’m too *afraid*! I’m *scared*!”

“Sadie. You *have* to try okay?” Tianna says, bending down and putting her face inches from Sadie’s. “*Please*, we need to know *which* of these doors has something behind them that will be the *easiest* to fight. Maybe then, we can get inside and at least close *that* door, and find a way out... or... or, *something*!”

A *thundering* crash bows the door beside them. “Sadie, try it... *now*!”

Sadie’s tiny body is shaking violently as though someone is *shaking* her by the shoulders. She licks her lips, *leans* forward and looks at the door directly across from her.

Concentrating with all her will, she shakes her head and says, “I *can*’t! I can’t *see* through the door! I don’t know *why*!”

“These doors must have some kind of anti-*sight* penetration spell on them!” Thian yells as he spins, hearing a *terrifying* growl right behind him. Then, after chewing on his lower lip for a moment yells, “Wait... the *puzzle*! It says to take the *second* door from the left... we *did*. It then says to take the *third* right. I think it means, to take the *third* door on the right side of *this* pathway!”

They all turn to look at that door, where *horrible* howling and *scratching* noises are coming from... like something is trying to *dig* its way through the door.

“Are you *crazy*?! ” Cassandra yells. “There’s no *way* we’re opening *that* door. No *way*!”

“We *have* to!” Thian yells back. “The *only* clues we have, as to what we need to do, are on that *puzzle* we put together! We *have* to do what it says! We *have* to!”

“But what if you’re *wrong*?! ” Cassandra screams at him.

“Well, we sure can’t wait *here* for something to *burst* through these doors, *that*’s for sure!” Anastasia yells at Cassandra.

“I’m with *Thian* on this one!” Tianna yells. “Amanda, see if you can open the third door from the *right* of the entrance. Everyone else, get ready to *blast* whatever might be in there. *Move*!”

As Amanda steps forward, she sees little Sadie throw up, which starts Anastasia and Cassandra doing the same thing. Their *nerves* are simply overwhelmed.

Forcing down the bile Amanda feels rising in her *own* throat, she holds up her shaking arms and yells, “Orathian!”

Nothing.

“Amanda, get *closer* to the door!” Thian yells. “It might have a *proximity* spell on it, so you have to be right *next* to it for the spell to work!”

Amanda, shaking hard, steps right in front of the door. “Orathian!”

*Clank... clank... clank.*

The door pops open about an inch as Amanda jumps back. Everyone crouches, pointing their wands at the door, *waiting* for the attack. However, *nothing* comes crashing through... *yet*.

Amanda looks nervously to the others. Thian and Tianna both nod at her at the same time. Amanda turns back to the door. Forcing down a dry swallow, she approaches, places her trembling hand on the door, then *yanks* the door fully open as she jumps back, pointing her own wand inside, heart *thundering*.

To everyone’s surprise, there is *nothing* there trying to get out - only another tunnel with the pathway *again* lined with *dozens* of other doors on each side. Many of the doors are *bulging* again and again, as something huge *thunders* repeatedly against them, accompanied by horrifying cries and *deep* growls. The screaming sounds like people being *tortured*, and their *cries* for help, tear at everyone’s soul.

Coming from the door just inside and to the left within this new tunnel, are sounds of *dozens* of people screaming.

But there is *one* voice that is louder and *clearer* than the others. A *woman’s* voice. It sounds like she is trying to *scratch* her way through the ancient wooden door.

Amanda can hear the woman’s *finger nails* frantically scratching against the wood, and what sounds faintly like wood *splintering*. Amanda gives a shudder as she thinks about the woman’s fingernails being *torn* away, or long *sharp* splinters digging in under her nails, and into her fingertips.

The woman is *screaming* in one of the old witch languages Amanda had just learned. As Amanda concentrates on understanding the words, she suddenly *cries* out as the strange language turns into clear English.

The woman is screaming, “Please! *Help* us! Please, we’re *trapped*, we can’t get out... and they’re *coming*! They’re coming to *get* us! Please, *help* us! They suck out our *eyes* then eat us while we’re *still* alive! Please, we *have* to get out! They’re *hungry* and... No! *Stay* away! *Please* not *me*! Noooo!” There is a strangled scream, then the woman’s voice goes... silent.

Amanda turns her head and *throws* up, as does Thian, who has also translated the woman’s cries. He has heard the same thing Amanda has, and is overwhelmed by it all.

Of course, both Cassandra and Anastasia know the language already, and heard the woman as well.

“*Now* what?” Tia cries, tears streaming down her face, as the others look through tears of their own.

“The *puzzle* says to take the second door on the left,” Thian cries pointing to that door.

Everyone looks to the door, which is *repeatedly* bowing as terrifying howling and growling follow each hit. Something huge is *crashing* again and again against the ancient wooden door.

“But... there’s some kind of *monster* in there!” Sadie screams and runs behind Tianna, peering out from around Tianna’s hip.

“Amanda!” Thian cries pointing to the door. “See if you can *open* it!”

Amanda, eyes bulging, heart *painfully* pounding in her chest, body shaking, asks just loud enough for everyone to hear, “Are... are you *sure* Thian?”

“No... but what *choice* do we have? We can’t wait for all the *other* monsters to come crashing through these other doors to get *us* too! Better to fight only *one*, then who knows *how* many!”

A woman’s *scream* comes from the door Amanda is standing near, sending Amanda darting to the second door on the left within this new tunnel.

Feeling as though she may *pass* out at any moment from fright, and an overdose of adrenalin, Amanda holds her quaking arms up, just as there is a *thundering* crash against the door, which bows toward her, making her jump back with a scream, her throat so dry, she can no longer swallow. Tears are making it hard to see. Quickly wiping her eyes on her sleeve, she yells, “Orathian!”

*Clank... clank... clank.*

Amanda and the others jump to the side, their eyes bulging, everyone holding their breath, pointing their shaking wands at the door as the door *explodes* outward, swinging fully open, *slamming* against the cavern wall, with so much force, it rebounds to become almost fully closed again, remaining open but a crack.

Then nothing.

Hearts *thundering*, with legs so weak they are all having a hard time standing, they wait several more heart pounding moments, but *nothing* comes crashing through the door.

Reaching up with a trembling hand, Amanda grasps her fingers around the inch of open door. Glancing to the others, she gets a nod from Tianna. Amanda bites her lower lip so hard, it begins to bleed. Yanking the door open, she jumps back with a yell, eyes darting frantically around the inside.

Nothing.

Everyone’s wand is whipping in all directions, looking for whatever giant creature has been crashing into the door and making it bow out.

There is nothing waiting for them.

It’s just another long tunnel, but this time, there are no other doors to be seen.

After several moments’ hesitation, Thian yells, “*Pick* up your brooms and let’s get inside! We need to see what’s *further* in! Well? *Move!*”

Everyone looks around for their broom, which they dropped to fight whatever might come charging out at them. Cassandra, Anastasia and Sadie have to run back into the other tunnels to get theirs, which they had dropped almost right away when the screaming first started.

When everyone is gathered in front of the new tunnel, Thian yells over the almost *unbearable* screaming, *howling*, growling and *pounding* of the two other tunnels, “*Come* on, let’s go!”

They all hurry inside. Amanda spins, raising her arms as she yells, “Neldor!” The ancient wooden door instantly slams shut.

At the *instant* the door locks into place, *everything* becomes dead quiet. The only sounds that can be heard are the crying, sniffing and panting sounds coming from themselves. All eyes are wide with fright, mouths open panting for breath, everyone shaking hard.

“By the Oak and Ash!” Tia says clutching her chest, her face drained of color and visibly shaking, still trying to catch her breath. “It sounds like those people are being *tortured*, and, and...”

“*Monsters* of some kind *howling* and... did you hear that *growling?*” Tianna asks with her back pressed against the tunnel wall, trying to catch her breath as well.

“Yeah, I *did*,” Thian says forcing down a dry swallow. “And something *huge* was pounding on some of those doors too. They kept *bulging* out with each attack. Scared the *heck* out of me.”

“Did... did you hear what that *lady* was screaming?” Amanda asks as tears begin to stream down her face again.

All the others nod. They had all wanted to know what the lady was screaming from behind the door, and now, they all wished they had not.

“Those *poor* people!” Tia cries, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. “We need to *help* them, but... *how*?”

No one says anything at all for several moments, then Thian quietly says, “Listen. There’s *nothing* we can do for them now. If we stay around here, *we* may end up with *them* you know?”

“He’s right,” Cassandra says wiping the hair from her eyes. “We don’t even know how many... uh, *whatever* they may be... are waiting behind those doors either. It would be *stupid* for us to try anything. We’re *still* alive, and I’d like to *keep* it that way.”

“Besides, there may be *nothing* behind any of those doors you know?” Anastasia says looking around nervously. “I mean, the door *we* went through sounded like it had some *huge* monster behind it... but there wasn’t *anything* here. The door has been *Wizitched* to bow outward, and make all those *horrible* sounds. It’s just a *trick* to keep people from opening the door.”

“Yeah, well...” Tianna says looking around a little. “*Some* may not have anything behind them, but, I’m pretty sure Sadie’s right. I’m betting that there are things behind *some* of those doors, and I’m not too *keen* on finding out what. So, what do we do now?”

They all debate what to do for a few more minutes, when Thian says, “Well, I really do think we need to move on. But first, I’ve got to use the *outhouse*. I darn near *wet* myself. And I can really do with a *splash* of cold water on my face too.”

Thian drops his pack, pulls out his can of Instant Outhouse, sets it on the pathway and pops the lid off. As he waves his wand and the outhouse appears, he grabs the door and yanks it open, hurrying inside, as the door slams, locking behind him.

When Thian steps back through the door, he cannot help but laugh. There is a line of *seven* outhouses spaced along the pathway.

Once everyone has freshened up, and have re-packed their outhouses in their travelers pack, they nervously make their way down the tunnel pathway.

## Into Witch Mountain

[To TOC](#)

The pathway winds in a snake-like fashion for about a thousand feet, slowly turning into a *spectacular* sparkling pathway. The walls, ceiling and floor, all sparkle in hues of greens and blues. It is absolutely beautiful. Then, as they round a corner, they walk into a small sized cavern, and face another large, ancient round wooden door. The door is set inside a red and black circular polished stone. The door has Theban writing on it in a circular fashion, around the outer edge. The door looks like this:



This is what the writing around the door looks like:

Ἄλλοι ἄλλοι ἄλλοι ἄλλοι ἄλλοι ἄλλοι ἄλλοι ἄλλοι  
ἄλλοι ἄλλοι ἄλλοι ἄλλοι ἄλλοι ἄλλοι ἄλλοι ἄλλοι

Amanda and the others step up to the door and concentrate on understanding what it says. In a moment, Amanda sees the ancient Theban letters morph and change into English. This is what it says:

**welcome to witch mountain portal nine**

“Portal... *nine*?” Anastasia says looking at Cassandra. “There are at least eight *other* ways into Witch Mountain? We’ve looked for *years* and never even found *one*!”

“Well, we’ve all found *this* one!” Cassandra says with a smile. “We *knew* the stories were true and not just *myths* or legends. But I’ve got to tell you, I always thought we’d just find some *cave* that led into the mountain. Then, *maybe* a door or something, but not... not all we just *went* through! There was nothing in the stories about any of *this*!”

“Yeah, and let’s hope that *whatever*’s on the other side of this door, isn’t something *else* that’s going to scare us half to death!” Anastasia says with a nervous smile.

“Sadie,” Thian says turning to look down at Sadie’s little face, as she looks up at him. “Can you see anything on the other side of the door? Or does it have an anti-sight penetration spell on *it* too?”

Tianna gives Thian an “Oh *Thian*, why did you *say* that?” kind of look. Then Thian remembers that Cassandra does not know Sadie *can* actually see through solid objects, and that Anastasia thinks she knows what race Sadie is from, but has not said anything.

For a moment, Sadie just looks at Cassandra with a frightened look on her face. Then Cassandra’s eyes fly *wide* with understanding as she says, “You... you’re... you really *can* see through doors *can’t* you? And, you really *did* see into the mountain, through *solid* stone! You’re *Keptic* aren’t you?”

Sadie turns quickly to look at Tianna. Tianna walks to Sadie and puts her hand on Sadie’s shoulder. She then turns to Cassandra saying, “Yeah, she *is*. What of it?”

Cassandra stares at Sadie with her mouth hanging open. After a moment Cassandra says, “Wow, with *your* abilities, I bet we could find the treasure for *sure*! When we get back, uh, maybe you could help us *find* it! You’d get a *cut* of course... or at least *something* anyway. After all, your kind *owes* us for those *horrible* things you did to... *our* people.”

Tianna steps forward saying angrily, “Just what do you *mean*... *her* kind? Sadie owes no one *anything* at all. *She* hasn’t done anything *wrong* at all! She owes *no* one anything for what her *ancestors* may have done to... *your* kind. Just as *your* kind owe no one anything at all for whatever *your* ancestors may have done.

“Times change, *people*, cultures and *laws* change. When we finish what we’ve started, it will be *Sadie’s* decision if she wants to go with you or not - *not* because she owes *you* or anybody else *anything*. But for now, she has *freely* chosen to be one of our team members, and she will stay with us as long as *she* chooses to... *got* it? And if you say *one* word to anyone we meet about her race, *or* her abilities while you’re with us... I *promise* you... you’ll *very*... much... *regret* it!”

The smile slides from Cassandra’s face, as she glares at Tianna with a snarl on her lips. Tianna takes another step toward Cassandra and says, “Or would you like us to *tie* you up and *leave* you here? Or actually... maybe we should *toss* you back into the tunnels, and have Sadie put an anti-unlocking spell on the *exit* doors, so you *can’t* get out. And you’ll have to try to fight *whatever* comes crashing through all those doors on your own.”

“You wouldn’t *dare*!” Cassandra shouts in challenge. “You don’t have the *guts* to...”

Tianna draws her wand so fast, Cassandra never even sees the orange flash of the binding spell. Cassandra goes *ridged*, as a coil of rope appears out of thin air, instantly winding itself around her and tightens. As the coil tightens around her ankles, *snapping* them together, she topples over, falling *hard* onto her back with a cry of surprise, her eyes bulging.”

“Tianna! *Stop* it!” Tia shouts looking startled.

“You just *wait* till I get up! You *filthy*, *stinking*, lowlife *Elf*!” Cassandra screams. “I’ll teach you and your *filthy* race a lesson or two!”

Tia gasps, and before Tianna can even raise her wand, Amanda is shocked to see Tia draw her wand and fire off a *silencing* spell, instantly cutting off Cassandra’s ranting in mid rant. Cassandra’s eyes widen, finding her lips are moving but nothing is coming out.

“Sadie...” Tia says turning to her with a stern expression and steady voice. “Turn her... into a cavern *spider*, like you did that really *huge*, tall, *mean* man that said bad things about you.”

Sadie looks both frightened *and* confused. She has never turned anybody into *anything*, and has no idea even how to *do* such a horrible thing. Sadie looks over at Amanda who is standing off to one side, and sees Amanda give her a quick wink, trying not to burst into laughter. Sadie instantly knows what they are doing.

“Oh, uh, well, I’ve used *that* one a few times now. Maybe I should... turn her into a cave *slug*, you know? I mean, she is kind of *slimy*... so, maybe she’d *really* like to be slimy, and stay

in here, like... *forever*! Yeah, I'll turn her into a *green* cave slug, with hideous *warts* and *pus* popping sores."

Sadie draws her wand, veeeery slowly, with an almost *wild* and hungry look on her face, while doing her best to keep from laughing. She points her wand at the very still and wide eyed Cassandra, and begins to *growl*.

Cassandra's head begins *thrashing* from side to side, tears filling her eyes.

"No! You *can't*! *Please*! She'll be good, *won't* you Cassa?" Anastasia yells. She had caught Amanda's eyes and wink too, and knows that they are only trying to *scare* Cassandra enough so she will not give them away, or do something *stupid*... which Cassandra is well known for doing.

Cassandra nods quickly, looking pleadingly to Sadie. Sadie looks to Amanda who *hesitates* for a moment, as though deciding Cassandra's fate, then shrugs followed by a nod.

"Well... okay," Sadie says lowering her wand. "For *now* anyway."

Tia fires off a spell to reverse the silencing spell she had cast, quickly followed by Tianna firing off an unbinding spell.

For a moment, Cassandra just lays there on the cavern floor, looking frightened, and not sure whether she should get up or not. Tianna steps over to her, bends and extends her arm. Cassandra lets out a cry, turns her head and *clamps* her eyes shut, while scrunching up her face, *waiting* to be struck. After a moment, Cassandra opens one eye, to find she is looking at Tianna's extended hand. For a moment, Cassandra just looks at it, then reaches up and grasps it. Tianna pulls hard, helping her to her feet.

Thian says, "Sadie, see if you *can* see what's on the other side of this door okay?"

Everyone ignores Cassandra, knowing she has gotten the message. Sadie puts her wand away and walks to stand in front of the door. Narrowing her brows, she leans forward and concentrates.

"Well, there's a short pathway and, uh, what looks like... *vines* maybe? I'm not sure... but *some* kind of foliage anyway. I don't see any *traps* or animals though."

"Okay, well, that's *something* anyway," Thian says stepping to the door. "But, I think we better have our wands at the ready anyway... just in case there *might* be something outside the cave we can't see." After everyone has drawn their wands, Cassandra's shaking a little more than the others, Thian holds up his arms and says, "Orathian!" There are several clanks, then the door pops open about an inch.

Thian grasps the tarnished circular ring, and pulls the door wide. Sure enough, there *is* a short pathway, which ends in a partially covered cave opening. It is covered about *half* way down with hanging vines. Extending up from the ground outside, is some kind of grass, about six feet tall.

"Well, let's see what's outside," Tianna says as she steps through the doorway, Sadie holding onto her hand and skipping along beside her.

Everyone walks down the pathway to the vines. Tianna pushes the vines out of her way, as she begins walking into the tall grass. Thian has just caught up with Tianna and Sadie, and both Tianna and Thian begin doing their best to make a path through the tall grass.

As they look above them, there is a *very* large, curving overhang of rock. It is as though they have left the cave, only to enter a portion of land that is *covered* by a huge overhanging rock arch.

After a few moments, they break through the tall grass and step out onto an area of short green grass.

They are standing on a ledge that looks down into a small, lush valley surrounded by forest below them. There are trees, wildflowers, a small *stream*, and what looks to be five *roads* branching off in various directions, at the base of the hillside-like landing they are standing on.

Tia looks up and gives a gasp in surprise. "By the *moons*, look!" she says pointing up.

Everyone looks up and gasps as one. There is *no* sky... at least not the kind *they* are used to.

They see that they are truly *inside* the gigantic mountain that is *hollow*. It looks like a solid mountain from outside, but, in reality, it is *not*.

The mountain hides an entire *sub*-realm. There are many types of birds, dozens flying far overhead, and many over the trees far below. The arch of the *gigantic* interior is glowing a soft orangish-yellow... reminding them of outside the mountain, in the *real* light.

"It's *true* Cassa!" Anastasia says breathlessly, looking around. "Everything we've read... it's all *true*! The stories talked about a *giant* mountain which is hollow... the mountain was called *Witch* Mountain, because that's where the many powerful witches *fled* during the Horation war.

"It said *that* war lasted for *seven* centuries. That the most powerful witches of the time had banned together, and using some *long* lost spells, used Wizitch, to hollow out an *entire* mountain, to make a refuge for their kindred. It is legend that it is *completely* self-sustaining, having its own food, *water*, air and stuff. It says the *inside* of the mountain has been Wizitched to change *its* lighting, to match that which is outside the mountain, allowing crops to grow and providing *heat* and light. I've read that as the day goes on, the inside glows *brighter*... just like sunlight. In the evenings, it changes colors, and looks like a *real* sunset. It says, because the mountain is so *huge* inside, it has its own *climate*, and you get *clouds*, even rains and stuff. It's all *real*. I never thought I'd *really* ever get to see it." Turning, smiling to the others, she says, "This... is *awesome*!"

Everyone laughs - even Cassandra, who is just *too* excited to care *what* Sadie or the others could do to her.

"But, where do we go from *here*?" Amanda asks. "The Journal says *nothing* about what to do once inside. I see *five* roads leading away from the base of where we're standing. Which one do we take? They *all* disappear into the forest. It could take *months* at least, to explore each one... maybe *longer*."

"The *second* from the left," Anastasia says with confidence and a smile. "Like I told you... I've read *everything* I could find on Witch Mountain, and in one of those books, it talks about someone having found an entrance into the mountain, *close* to where Cassa and I live. *That's* the book I read the most. I bet *this* is where they entered too."

"But, the greeting says this is portal *nine*," Tia says looking around. "What makes you think this is the *same* portal as the one in your book?"

"Because... it talks about the traveler finding *five* roads at the base of some kind of landing they found, when *they* first entered the inside portion of the mountain.

"And you're right Amanda, *they* spent months traveling each road, and there are all *kinds* of stories, about what they found down each road. They had started down the first road on the *right*. But, *you* said you needed to talk to the really *powerful* witch named Bellinora. I've read and *reread* those books so many times, I've practically got them *memorized*! The traveler said that when they had taken the *second* road from the left, it led to a place called *Darkwoods Village*, which wasn't too far away. Whatever '*too* far away means.'

"Three of the books I read, mentioned that the old witch Bellinora had lived in a cave, up in *another* mountain, just outside someplace called... *Darkwoods Village*. If this *is* the same entrance I've read about, then we need to take the *second* road from the left."

After talking it over for a few minutes, they decide that since they need to take *one* of the roads anyway, if Anastasia *is* right, it could indeed, possibly save them *months* of searching.

They mount up and begin flying down the mountain, hugging it as tightly as possible, to keep out of sight of whoever, or *whatever*, may be in the area.

## Journey To Darkwoods Village

[To TOC](#)

As they reach the branch of roads, they hover for a few moments and listen. The sound of birds chirping and the rippling of the water in the stream, as it tumbles over the many stones is all they can hear. The air is *fresh* and clean, and the beautifully colored wildflowers scattered everywhere make them all smile.

They begin flying off very low, a few feet above their chosen dirt road, along its winding path as it enters the forest.

There are many hills and what looks like *taller* mountains in all directions away from this side of the mountain entrance. One mountain, *far* in the distance, in the direction they are now flying, looks to be *ten* thousand feet high at least.

"This... is *unreal*, you know?" Thian says looking up at the clouds high above them. "I mean, there are *mountains*... inside *this* mountain! I wonder if they're hollow too?"

"Don' know," Tianna says shaking her head, looking up as well. "But it is *truly* remarkable. I never would have thought all *this* would be inside a mountain. Kind of makes me wonder if *ours* back home are hollow too - and what might be in *them*." They fly for about an hour, all enjoying this new environment.

"Hey, look!" Tia says pointing further down the road. "It looks like the road branches off in two directions, *doesn't* it?"

"Yeah, it does," Thian says looking over his shoulder to Tia. "Come on, let's speed up a little. I think I see a *sign* on a post there too."

They fly faster and soon come to a "Y" in the road. There is an old, *partially* rotted away signpost stuck in the ground, between the two roads. This is what it looks like:



"It's in that ancient *witch* writing... I mean, *Theban*," Tia says coming to hover beside Tianna. "Looks like it's a really good thing *Sadie* came along, or we'd *never* be able to read any of it! And if not for *Amanda*, doing... *whatever* she did to us, *we* wouldn't be able to read it either. Let's see what it says."

They all concentrate and the Theban text morphs into their native language. Amanda says as she reads it in English, "'**Darkwoods Village... Take road left.**' You *did* it Anastasia! You *found* the way to *Darkwoods Village*!"

They all have grins as they head off along the partially overgrown dirt road to their left.

"I can't *believe* I really found it!" Anastasia says with a laugh. "It really *does* exist! This is *soooo* exciting! I've always dreamed of *finding* Witch Mountain, and *exploring* all the things I've read about too. But I *never* really thought I'd actually end up *doing* it. Cassa... we're *really* here."

Cassandra smiles and nods. "Yeah, I know what you mean. I never thought *I'd* ever really be here either. I can't *wait* to see what we find."

They fly on for about five minutes, chatting about their luck at finding the right road, when Amanda suddenly slows, then stops in a hover. Turning she looks over her shoulder, back along the dirt road.

Tia, flying beside Amanda, slows and stops. "What is it Amanda? Do you *hear* something?" Everyone comes to a stop, then turns around to listen to what is going on.

"No. I don't *hear* anything. But..."

"But *what*?" Thian asks as he drifts over to Tia and Amanda.

"Something *bothers* me about that sign back there," Amanda says with a slight shake of her head and a puzzled expression.

Cassandra asks with a sigh and irritated tone, "What *about* it? We *all* read it, and it *said* the way to *Darkwoods Village* is *down* the left fork. *That's* the one we took, and are *still* on! So, *what's* the problem? We're just *wasting* time."

Tianna drifts over beside Thian, and looking at Cassandra, says with a concerned look, "Believe me, if *Amanda* thinks something's up, *I'd* like to hear what she has to say, *before* going any further." Turning to Amanda, she asks, "What is it about the sign that bothers you?"

"Well... it's *probably* nothing... maybe. But, I got like a... *tingling* when I looked at the sign."

"*What?!*" Cassandra snorts with another look of irritation. "You stopped *all* of us, because you felt a *tingling* when you looked at the sign? Give us a *break*!"

"*Forget* the *stupid* sign, and let's *go* and see what we can find in *Darkwoods Village*. They might even have *other* stories we haven't heard, about the *Tal'* Reann treasure. Who *cares* if you felt some *stupid* tingling, looking at some *stupid* sign? What *difference* does it make anyway?"

Tianna shoots Cassandra a look that makes Cassandra flush, then turn away.

Amanda has turned her broom around, and is facing back down the road in the direction they have flown.

"Amanda, was it something about the *writing*? Or... or how it was *written*?" Tia asks. "I mean, we *all* saw it, and it looked okay to us."

"Well, I can't really explain it... but, uh, when I looked at the sign when we first came to it, I got a kind of... *tingling*. But then, as I was turning away to fly with you guys down this road, I, uh, kind of got a... *shock*."

Then leaning forward some and tilting her head slightly, looking her friends in their eyes, continued, "You *know* the kind of shock I'm talking about." Then reaches up and touches her clothing, which her necklace rests just beneath. Her friends inhale sharply.

Sadie is not sure *what* is going on, but as Amanda touches where her necklace is, she thinks about how *powerful* they said it is, and puts two-and-two together. Sadie knows it has *something* to do with the power of the necklace. Of course, neither Anastasia nor Cassandra have *any* idea what Amanda is talking about.

"*What*... shock?" Anastasia asks.

"And what does *that* have to do with the sign?" Cassandra asks holding up both hands.

"Amanda, do you want to go back and take another look at the sign?" Thian asks looking back down the road.

“Yeah. I do. I’m not sure why, but... yeah, I do. You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to though.”

“Uh-uh. We *stick* together for now,” Tia says. “Come on, let’s go back and take a closer look.”

They fly quickly down the old road, and soon arrive at the “Y.” They all dismount and gather behind Amanda in front of the sign.

“Just looks like *any* old sign to me,” Cassandra sneers. “Except for the *Theban* writing. But I guess that’s what they use here. After all, we *are* in Witch Mountain.”

“No... there’s *something* about this sign that’s not right,” Amanda says softly leaning in toward it a little. “I’m getting that kind of *tingling* again.” After a short pause, she gives a little cry and jumps back right into Tia, startling the others.

“What *is* it?!” Thian cries, pulling his wand, as do the others, looking around with eyes wide. “What’s wrong?”

“The *other* Theban writing and the arrow, just... *popped* out at me. It’s in *full* 3D too. It startled me is all... sorry.” Then laughing, “Everything’s okay Thian. You guys don’t need your wands.”

“What other writing?” Anastasia asks leaning in to see if there is tiny writing she missed.

Amanda laughs as she looks at the sign again and says, “Oh... my... *God*... it’s a *stereogram*! I can’t *believe* they use stereograms here. I *love* stereograms!”

“What are... *stereograms*?” Thian asks looking at the sign. “I can’t see anything at all but the *plant* like pattern and the *writing* we’ve already read.”

“What do *you* see Amanda, when *you* look at the sign?” Sadie asks with wonder, looking wide-eyed up into Amanda’s striking green eyes.

“Well, just under what we read before, in the larger *blank* area, is a *hidden* message. The writing is in Theban too, and there is a large arrow next to that writing, pointing to the *right*. The text says... ‘Go.’ That’s *it*. Just the word ‘go’ and a *right* facing arrow. It’s telling us to take the road to the *right*... and *not* the one to the left!”

“But *I* don’t see anything at all!” Tianna says squinting at the sign. “How can *you* see it, and we *can’t*? Is it because of the neck... well, *you* know?”

Amanda laughs, seeing all of them leaning in and squinting. “No. Most *anyone* can see stereograms, if they don’t have eye problems, and you take some time to learn *how* to see them. All you have to do is *not* focus on the sign, but, like focus a little way *through* it. Like you’re looking through a *glass* sign to something else a little further away.

“Um... try focusing on that *tall* weed, or *whatever* it is, that’s just beside the sign, and a little ways back. *See* it? Then, keeping your eyes locked with that *distance* of focus, move your eyes back to the sign... but *don’t* change your focus. If you focus back on the *sign*, you’ll *never* be able to see the hidden stuff. *Try* it.”

They are soon laughing at how *silly* they each look, staring at the plant, then slowly turning their heads back to the sign, leaning in like they are having trouble seeing.

“Another way people learn to see these, is to look at the sign, then *un-focus* your eyes,” Amanda says with a laugh, watching them all squinting at the sign. “You know? Like when you’re reading something when you’re *really* tired, and the text blurs. That’s how *I* was first able to see them. I looked at a stereogram, then made my eyes go... well, *blurry*. The image just *popped* right out at me.”

After several minutes, Tia gives a gasp and jumps back clutching her chest. “By the *moons*! I think I just *saw* it!” A huge grin spreads across her face. “It was *only* for a second, but I *saw* the

Theban text, and there *was* an arrow pointing to the right. By the *moons* Amanda... that *scared* me half to death! They were like... like *floating* right out in front of me, away from some background. Like they were *suspended* in space! I have *got* to do *that* again!” Everyone laughs and redoubles their efforts.

After several more minutes, Tia can see and hold the 3D image of the text and arrow, and is now practicing on getting faster at doing it. It takes almost half an hour more for Tianna, Thian, Sadie and Anastasia to get the hang of it. All are surprised and filled with wonder when they first see it, and are able to hold the image. Only *Cassandra* cannot do it, and she is *not* happy in the least.

Finally, Tianna says, “Well, this was *really* interesting. I heard that wizards and witches used codes, *invisible* inks and things like that. And we’ve seen some of them too. But I’ve never heard of these... *stereogram* thingies. They’re *really* cool. But, I really think we better be moving on now you know?”

Everyone agrees, other than Cassandra, who is *determined* not to be the only one who cannot do something everyone else can.

Tianna says mounting her broom, “Well, *you* can stay here as long as you like Cassandra. But the *rest* of us are moving on.”

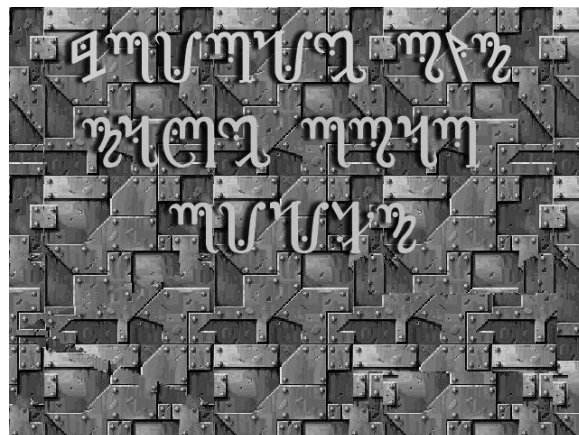
The others mount up, and begin moving off along the road that branches off to the right.

After a few moments more of intense concentration, Cassandra mumbles something under her breath, mounts quickly, and speeds off after them.

They have flown for almost three hours through the dense forest, when they come to *another* “Y” in the road, with two signs. One sign says to take the road to the right, for *Darkwoods Village*, and the *left* road to someplace called *Tillies Lake*. They all laugh as they look for a hidden stereogram, other than Cassandra, but cannot find one. So, they head off along the right hand path.

It is another three and a half hours, of winding their way carefully through the now *very* dense forest, following the somewhat overgrown old dirt road, before they come to a “T” in the road, where they find another sign.

The sign looks like this:



Everyone but Cassandra studies the sign. Amanda can spot a stereogram *instantly* when she blurs her eyes. So, she sees the hidden message right away. It is Thian who spots it next, followed by Tianna, Tia and Sadie.

It takes Anastasia about three minutes longer than the others, but she then gasps. “Well the sign says, ‘**Bridge out take road right.**’ But, there’s a *hidden* image of a *large* arrow pointing to the *left*. So, I *guess* it wants us to go *left* instead of right, like the visible writing says.”

They all turn to look to the road on their left. It is *completely* overgrown with weeds and creeping vines. They look to the right, and the road looks *fairly* well traveled. Only a few weeds and some tangles of creeping vines.

“Wait! You’re telling *me* that *just* because some *stupid* message is hidden in that sign, that we are going to go... *that* way, instead of what the *sign* says?” Cassandra asks in an irritated tone. “For all *we* know, we’ve been following the *wrong* roads all this time. I mean, just *look* at the road you want to take *now*. It’s *completely* overgrown. It doesn’t look like *anyone*’s gone that way in *years*! But the road the *sign* says to take, looks in *pretty* good shape. At least it looks *traveled*. And we don’t know how *old* any of these signs are either. Look how old and *faded* they are! They may not even be *good* now!”

“She’s right you know,” Anastasia says looking at the overgrown dirt road. “How *do* we know which road to follow? The book I told you about with the traveler, never said *anything* about these other roads. It just said, he took the *second* road from the left when he first arrived inside the mountain.”

“We don’t.” Tia says looking at Anastasia. “But, if Amanda *felt* something, and it bothered her enough to turn around and take another *look* at the sign, and she found that *stereogram* thing... that’s *good* enough for me.”

Turning to look at Amanda, Tia asks, “Have you gotten, uh, anymore *shocks* when we ride away from the signs?”

“No. So, *actually*, I think we’ve been going in the *right* direction each time. I don’t know for *sure* though, but, I *think* so.”

“Well, we’re here now, and I say let’s *keep* going,” Thian says as he turns and begins flying just over the weed-filled dirt road. “If things *don’t* work out, we’ve just lost some time. We can always come back and start *over* you know? Come on, let’s keep going.”

They all head off and find that the overgrown road leads them *right* into the trees of a thicker area of the dense green forest. The old road winds its way between the trees, and from time to time, everyone will *laugh* at some of the animals that peek out from behind a tree or boulder, to look at them.

They have stopped *several* times during the long day, to use their Instant Outhouses, and to take a break. It is now approaching evening and the inside of the mountain has dimmed to reveal a *beautiful* sunset... without a *real* sun. The coloring in the clouds of rich oranges, yellows and *pinks* is stunning, that is... when you could *see* them through an occasional clearing in the trees.

Coming around a bend in the trees, they spot a fairly good sized stream with a large clearing there. Tired and *hungry*, they decide to stop, move off the old road and set up Thian’s cabin by the stream. Once the cabin is up and filled with water, they refill their Instant Outhouses too, not knowing *when* they may find water again. They enter the cabin and take turns taking a *long* hot bath, then have a great dinner of canned goods, and *lots* of packaged cookies and re-hydrated *marshmallows* for desert.

Amanda laughs as she pours water into a large bowl filled with powdered marshmallows. In a moment, the water begins to bubble, then full sized, *fluffy*, dry marshmallows begin popping up like popcorn, until the entire bowl is *filled* with yummy marshmallows.

“So, did any of your books say how long it would *take* to get to *Darkwoods Village*, from the entrance that is, Anastasia?” Tia asks, speaking around a mouth full of marshmallows, reaching for her glass of tea.

“Well, actually, I’ve been *trying* to remember. I’m pretty sure it said that it took *just* about a full day to get there, so, honestly, I *thought* we’d be there by now. But anyway, I don’t think it can be *too* much further you know? Well, if it’s *still* there... or ever was.”

“Well, I hope it’s not *too* far off,” Cassandra says stabbing her second helping of a Cucuteo egg with her fork. “I’d really like to see the *village*, if it’s still there. I mean, we haven’t seen a *single* person yet. Maybe they aren’t really here anymore you know. And we’re getting pretty close to that *huge* mountain inside this one too. I hope we find the village, or *something* soon.”

“Maybe we haven’t seen anybody,” Amanda says thoughtfully, “because all we’ve been doing is flying along inside this really *dense* forest. Heck, there could be people *flying* all over the place, and we’d *never* see them from down amongst these trees.”

“Yeah, well maybe,” Thian says pushing his plate away. “I think I’m going to fly to the large hill we saw in the distance, and have a look from the top of it,” Thian says taking his dish to the sink. “It’s about five-hundred feet high or so I think, spotting it from time to time when the trees thinned some. And I’d just like to see what’s on the other *side* before calling it a night. It looks like the forest is thinning out some about there too. Anyone wanna come with me?”

“Yeah, *I’ll* go with you,” Tianna says taking her dish to the sink as well.

“I’ll do the dishes,” Amanda says getting up. “You two go have a look, and the rest of you, go relax a little. It’s been a *long* day.”

Thian and Tianna grab their brooms and head off down the road in the dimming light within the mountain.

In about an hour, the door *flies* open, making everyone jump. Thian and Tianna rush in all excited.

“We *found* it! We *found* the village!” Tianna yells as everyone turns to look at them.

“Yeah! And it’s only about *five* miles from that tall hill too!” Thian says wiping his nose on his sleeve. “And there’re a *lot* of people there too! It’s a pretty *good* sized village with lots of shops. Has to be at least *three* times the size of *our* village!”

“We saw a lot of people flying on *old* style brooms, a few using animal drawn carts on the old dirt roads, and a *lot* of people wandering around the shops. There are a lot of *houses* scattered out and away from the village too. It looks like there are houses scattered from the village, out to *around* where that huge mountain is that’s inside this one, which looks like it may only be twenty-five miles or so from here.

“We flew around the outside of the village and found *several* roads leading in. I think we should keep to the forest like Tianna and I did, then fly down one of the *side* roads into the village. That way, it will look like we’re just coming from a *normal* direction. I mean, I don’t know how many people they may be used to seeing coming out of the *forest*, from some *unused* road you know?”

“Can we go to the village and take a look around... *now*?” Cassandra asks excitedly. The others look just as excited.

Tia turns to Amanda, “It’s *your* party. What do you say?”

Amanda smiles at them. “I say... what are we *waiting* for?” Everyone cheers, then Amanda continues. “Thian, do you think it would be alright to leave our packs in the cabin, while we have a look around? All of us coming into the village wearing *travelers* packs may draw a little more

attention than we want for now...would make it rather *obvious* that we're new around here and all."

"Yeah, *no* problem. We're some distance off the old road anyway. And we're pretty well hidden here in the forest. We can come back for the night and pack things up in the morning, if we've found out where to go next that is. Come on, let's get our brooms and have a look around."

With that, they all head off to get their brooms.

In no time, everyone is gathered outside. They mount up with Thian and Tianna leading the way to the big hill, then off to the right through the forest.

As they fly, Amanda wants to know more about what Anastasia and Cassandra have read about Witch Mountain, and the people who live inside. Amanda and the others are told that Witch Mountain is said to be home to mostly outlaw wizards and witches, who are wanted for various *crimes*, and many who are, or had been, the *family* members of criminals.

It sounds like what Amanda calls a kind of old *wild* west of sorts. Anastasia says that no real law has been established, and in a fight, *anything* goes, even the *killing* curses. You need to be *tough* to survive inside Witch Mountain.

They fly about fifteen minutes until they come to a hover just inside the tree line, to be sure no one is on the dirt road in front of them, which leads into the village.

## Exploring The Village

[To TOC](#)

When they arrive at the road, they are surprised to see two *creature*-drawn carts loaded with people. None of the kids know what *kind* of animals are pulling the carts, but by the *looks* of the animals, you do *not* want to get very close to them.

The people in the carts are *dirty*, like they have been sleeping outside on the dirty ground for *weeks*. They also look really *mean*, even the *kids*. Not a smile on the lot of them.

As Amanda looks at the sky, she gives a short gasp, causing the others to look at her, then up into the sky as well. Far above at various levels, are *layers* of flyers on brooms. Most seem to be headed *for Darkwoods Village* – there are dozens upon *dozens* of flyers.

“Let’s wait for that last cart to go by, then fly into the village behind them okay?” Thian says pointing to a cart just coming into view. They watch the people in the last cart pass, and watch as they begin to round a corner in the road, disappearing around the high grasses and many trees.

Thian nervously looks around, then quickly flies out, leading the way to the road. As they turn onto the road, and begin to follow it, they all chat excitedly about what they will find in the village.

Soon, they are passed by two men, flying *very* fast on brooms, who zoom past them, almost *striking* Cassandra, making her and the others cry out in surprise, laughing as they *speed* by.

Cassandra screams after them, “*Watch* it you *idiots!*” Almost immediately, the two flyers veer off the road, one on either side, making a *wide* arc and quickly begin flying straight back to the kids.

“Cassa! What did you have to go and say *that* for? Now they’re coming *back*, and they look really *mad* too!”

Cassandra begins to draw her wand when Anastasia yells, “No! Cassa, remember what it said in the *books*? If you draw your wand inside Witch Mountain, you had *better* be ready to *use* it, because in here, if you *draw* a wand, it’s as good as a formal *challenge*, or more likely, with intent to *kill*. *Remember?* It said you *never* draw a wand in here unless you’re *prepared* to die!”

Cassandra, wide-eyed, lets go of her wand immediately. The others, who have their hands resting on their wands as well, let them go and keep their hands on their handlebars in plain sight.

The kids come to a hover as the two flyers quickly *swerve* to a stop on either side of them.

“Which one of you *filth* called us *idiots?*” a very large man on the right says, scowling at the kids as he *quickly* draws his wand, the other rider doing the same.

No one speaks.

“I said... which one of you *brats* called us *idiots?* Or do we need to teach *all* o’ you some manners?”

Amanda feels a *jolt* shoot through her, and she reaches up and touches the neckline of her robe, where her necklace lays just beneath.

Tianna, catching a movement from the corner of her eyes, turns slightly to see Amanda running her fingers across her chest, just below her neckline, at the level of the necklace.

Tianna’s eyes grow wide as she sees Amanda’s hair beginning to *rise* slowly off her back, and *flutter* slightly in the air. Amanda’s hair did not shoot *straight* up and back as Tianna had seen it do before, but she knows, things could get *really* interesting, very quickly.

“Yeah, and look at them there *brooms* they’s ride’n. Ain’t never *seen* no brooms like them before.”

“Must be some kind o’ *training* device, so these here stupid kids don’ *fall* off,” the two men howl.

“*I* think we needs to teach these brats some *manners* Jake. A few hits with the *torture* curse should do it, don’ you think?”

The large man laughs saying, “Yeah, *that* ought to do it alrigh’.”

“I wouldn’t *do* that if I were you,” Tianna says very seriously but calmly. “*That* could get you both *seriously* injured, or *killed*. We don’t want any *trouble* here, so, why don’t we all just go our own way and *enjoy* the village.”

“Oh, it’s really no *trouble* for us at all,” the one called Jake laughs. “And, since *you* opened your yap first, I guess we ought to start with... *you*! Yarro? You wanna have some *fun* with this one first?”

The somewhat thinner one named Yarro, grins with yellow and decaying teeth, then tips his tall pointed hat saying, “Why *thank* you Jake. Don’ mind if I do,” then gives a hideous sneer as he slowly raises his wand.

Tianna, turns slightly, quickly looking around the other kids to Amanda, and sees that Amanda’s hair is now *snapping* in some unseen breeze. The rest of the kids are *completely* focused on the two men, and have not noticed Amanda, who is at the back. Neither of the men have paid any attention to Amanda either, and are both focused on Tianna.

Tianna turns back to the two men and says calmly, casually cleaning some dirt from beneath her fingernails, as though she has not a *care* in the realm, “This is your *last* chance to leave, or I can’t be responsible for what happens to you.”

The two men are taken aback by her calm and disinterested demeanor, but both soon laugh. Yarro says, “*Cocky* little Elf ain’t ya? Maybe *this* will teach you and your friends to keep your *mouths* shut.” He raises his wand back over his shoulder, and begins to snap it down at Tianna.

*Quick* as a cat, Amanda *snatches* her wand from its holster. Without speaking a word, nor any *visible* bolts from her wand, she fires off *two* blazing spells. Neither *Yarro* nor the one called Jake, knows what *hit* them.

Both Jake and Yarro are sent *flying* off their brooms and hang suspended *upside* down. They are completely *bound* by rope, from *shoulders* to ankles, and both have a cloth *gag* stuffed in their mouths. They have been suspended with their heads about six feet off the ground, one on either side of the road. Their eyes are *wide* with surprise, as they look around for who has done this.

The kids, other than Tianna and Amanda, are frightened, as they all look around to see who saved them.

“I *warned* you,” Tianna says shaking her head at them as she casually bites a hangnail. There is then the sound of something *heavy* hitting the ground behind them. Tianna turns quickly to see Amanda lying on the dirt road, her broom resting beside her.

The others turn as well, gasping as they spot Amanda, unmoving on the ground.

“Amanda! Thian yells as he dismounts and runs to her. The others dismount quickly as well, and all kneel beside her.

Thian, clearly shaken, gently shakes Amanda. Amanda opens her eyes slowly, looking up into all the frightened faces looking back at her.

“Wha... What *happened*? Did I *faint*?”

“Uh... weren’t her eyes *green*?” Cassandra asks looking at Amanda rather confused.

Tianna says quickly and evenly, “*Stress* can change the color of your eyes - where *she* comes from anyway.” Tianna and Thian help Amanda unsteadily to her feet.

Amanda, inhaling sharply, spots the two men hanging upside down, bound and gagged. “Oh God. Did I, did I use the...”

Tianna cuts her off, “You *fainted* is all. We don’t know *what* happened to those two, but let’s get into the village before something happens to *us* too, *okay?*”

Amanda mounts her broom, her eyes constantly drifting to the two men. The kids all mount and fly past the stunned and frightened faces of the two men hanging upside down. Amanda *shudders* as she passes them, knowing full well, that *she* is the one responsible, but cannot remember having done it.

Once the kids are a little way from the dangling men, Anastasia asks, “Which *one* of you did it? Which one of you *hit* them with those spells? I didn’t see *any* bolts, and *no* one said anything.”

Thian, Tia, Tianna, Sadie, Cassandra and Anastasia, *all* deny having had anything to do with it. When they turn to look at the startled Amanda, Tianna quickly says, “Well we *know* it wasn’t her, after all, she had *fainted* you know? Besides, you would have to be really *advanced* to do something like *that*, without *speaking* the spell aloud, and *especially* without even a bolt from your *wand*. Only the *elite* can do that. And, we’re just *kids* after all. Come on, let’s go before whoever *did* do it, decides to do the *same* thing to us.”

As they approach the village, they hear music, and smell the wonderful smells of cooking coming from the various restaurants scattered about.

It is dark out now, but the sky far above inside the mountain, has been Wizitched to look *just* like the night sky *outside* the mountain. There are stars, and even a huge *moon*, scaled down for the size of this inner mountain, which is sending its silver-blue light down on the village.

When they round a curve in the road, the village comes into view, off in the distance.

“Oh wow!” Amanda says to no one in particular. “It’s *beautiful*! It’s all lit up like a *fairyland*.”

All the trees within the village have twinkling lights in them, and of course, there are *thousands* of fire-bugs, creating a constant change in patterns. The shop windows are *filled* with merchandise, and all the windows are emitting a soft orangish-yellow glow from flickering lanterns.

As Amanda looks up, she can see quite a few people on brooms, each with a *small* lantern hanging from the broom, flickering a soft orange glow. Thian had told her that *in* or around villages, towns and even well-lit cities, the lamps were required if you flew more than house height, so flyers would not *run* into each other in the dark, and of course, so those on the ground could see someone approaching. The sight of the illuminated flyers is *breathtaking*.

The kids, flying low, enter the main open portion of the village, like a town square. Thian spots the universal sign for a *broom* closet, which is of course, an image of a *string* of hanging brooms in something resembling an odd *closet*. They fly down the little alleyway on the right, to the closet, get their automated tickets, and store their brooms.

“This is *so* exciting!” Anastasia says as they walk from the alleyway toward the nearest shop. “I can’t *believe* we’re really *in* Witch Mountain! We are actually *inside* a mountain, and there’s an entire *village* here too, and *lots* of other people! My mom would *freak* out!”

They all laugh as they approach the first shop. The sign says, ‘Mr. Kimberley’s Wands, Staffs and Brooms Shop.’ They all step up to the window and peer inside. They are surprised to see that *most* of the brooms inside are of a *very* old type. Nothing in the shop comes *close* to the ones Thian, Amanda, Tia, Tianna and Sadie have. They all give each other knowing looks. They know the brooms Amanda, Thian, Tianna, Tia and Sadie are riding, would cause *quite* a stir. The

technology here, is like going back into the *dark* ages. The brooms in the shops are even *older* than the ones Cassandra and Anastasia are riding.

As soon as they step into the shop, many people turn to stare at them. It then dawns on the kids, that *everyone* in the shop, is dressed rather shabbily, and everyone is really *dirty*.

After a moment, a witch who looks like the ones Amanda had read about back on earth, comes over and stands before them, looking each of them up and down slowly. She has a narrow face, sunken eyes, long nose with a large *wart* on it, and a pointed chin. When she speaks, it actually makes Amanda *jump*, because she speaks in a high *shrill* voice, like the witches she had watched in cartoons.

"And what can I do for *you* dearies this evening?" Then, looking them over very carefully once again says, "You kids don't seem to be from around *this* end of Witch Mountain... where might you be *from*, if I might ask?"

"Oh, uh, we're here with our *parents* actually," Thian says looking around nervously, noticing at least half a dozen customers now eyeing them.

"Yeah, they're around here *someplace*. We, uh, *thought* they might be in here, but I don't *see* 'em," Tia says looking around as though searching for them.

"Actually, we better go *find* 'em. We're not *supposed* to wander off on our own." Sadie says looking like she does not want to get into trouble. "Come on you guys, let's go find 'em."

"Sorry to have bothered you," Amanda says as everyone turns and leaves the shop.

Once outside, Anastasia laughs saying, "Fast *thinking* you guys. Uh, we really stand out you know? We're too *clean*, we don't blend in at *all*. We need to, well, get *dirty*."

"No *problem*," Sadie says smiling. "Let's step around the side of the shop, back in the alleyway toward the broom closet. *I'll* fix us up."

"*You'll* fix us up?" Cassandra laughs looking down at the tiny girl. "Just what do you think you can do? You're just a little *kid*."

"You mean, other than see through *solid* rock, and turn you into a *cave* slug?" Tianna taunts, glaring at Cassandra, whose smile instantly vanishes.

As they step back around the corner of the shop into the alleyway, Thian takes a quick look around and nods to Sadie. Sadie pulls her wand, points it at the ground next to Thian and says, "Dustto Deo!" A thin vermilion bolt shoots out of Sadie's wand, striking the dirt, which instantly begins to vibrate. Sadie *flicks* her wand at Thian. Immediately, the dirt from around him *leaps* into the air and *covers* him from head to toe. His hair is being *messed* up, as though someone is frantically rubbing their hands through his hair.

He is *completely* covered now - his face, hands and clothing have *layers* of dirt and dust covering them, as some *thicker* dirty smears appear on his face. Surprised, Thian *coughs* as he takes several steps back, while everyone laughs.

"Uh, well... guess I'll blend in *now*!" Thian says spitting dirt from around his lips.

Sadie then does the same thing to the others, leaving *Cassandra* for last.

Turning to Cassandra, Sadie points her wand and says, "Dustto Deo *Beko* Treo!" After the expected dirt and dust, like that which the others experienced covers Cassandra, a *huge* bucket appears out of thin air, *directly* over Cassandra's head. It tilts forward. The bucket is *filled* with dust, *dirt*, leaves, grass clippings, along with small twigs, and what appears to Amanda, to be some kind of *smelly*, greenish... *dung*.

For a moment, Amanda cannot *see* Cassandra. Cassandra is completely covered by all the dirt, dust, and other things - she is covered from head to foot, in a very *thick* coating of *gunk*.

Cassandra begins coughing and *shaking* her head, as the others take several steps back, laughing *hysterically* and curling up their noses at the stench.

Cassandra shakes herself hard, while mounds of dirt, dust and debris fall away. She takes both her hands and begins shaking them *frantically* through her hair. Clouds of dust rise into the night air. She begins *patting* her clothing as huge amounts of the dirt and dust either fall away, or rise into the surrounding air. When she pulls her hands away, they are coated in streaks and chunks of the green *poop*, mixed with dirt, *twigs*, and dry grass.

Spitting several times, and *stomping* her feet, her boots completely *filled* with gook, she hisses, “You little *brat*! You *did* that on *purpose*, I ought to...”

“See yourself!” Anastasia laughs. “Actually, now *you* fit in better than *any* of us. And you, uh... *smell* more like some of them in the shop too.”

Everyone laughs as they all look at each other, covered in dirt and dust themselves. In a moment, even *Cassandra* begins to smile, even though she really tries not to.

“Uh, Sadie?” Tianna says with a grin. “As *amusing* as this is, don’t you think you may have... *overdone* it a little?”

“Oh, yeah, *sorry*. Actually, I’m not *done*. That’s just the first part of the spell.” She points her wand at Tianna saying, “Adapto!” There is a slight *cloud* of dust, then as it clears, Amanda sees that Tianna is now only *lightly* dusted, with *some* streaks of dirt on her face and arms. Her hair is ruffled and dirty, but not *overly* done, and her hands are fairly clean. Sadie has adapted the amount of dirt and dust, to *average* what she had seen on the people in the shop.

Amanda remembers when Tia had used the spell ‘Adapto Forma’ on her, when Tia and Tianna had made her new clothing that did not fit very well. Amanda remembers them telling her that the spell word ‘Adapto’ means, ‘fit, adjust or modify.’ Nodding to herself, Amanda understands that Sadie is concentrating on the meaning of *both* adjust and modify, to adjust the amount of dirt and dust, and to modify how it is applied to them.

Sadie uses the spell on the others... *even* Cassandra, who is the most grateful, although she still *smells* horrible. They now look more like *street* people, as though they have been sleeping for days in the forest.

“Wow, this is *great* Sadie! You’ll have to teach us *that* one!” Thian says still laughing. “Okay, let’s go have a good look around. Maybe we can find out if anyone knows where Bellinora’s *cave* is before it gets really late. We can always come back in the morning if we don’t.”

They walk back around the corner and down the old wooden walkway in front of the shops. They quickly pass the first shop, and step up to the next one, a *candy* shop. They all grin, and then step inside.

Amanda smiles as they enter, thinking, “This is *nothing* like *Cassandra’s Sweet Treats* back on the realm of *The Deep Forest Elves*. I don’t think *anything* could compare to the *aviary* there. Now *that* was something!”

They have a good time looking at all the treats, but when Thian looks around for the aura scanner used to pay for goods, he stops cold. He nudges Tianna and nods to the tall lady at the counter, who is paying the clerk for the sucker her daughter is now sucking on.

“What?” Tianna asks in a near whisper, causing the other kids to turn to see what is going on.

“She’s using *coins* to pay,” Thian says in a whisper. “So is that man over *there*. I don’t think they use the same *system* we do. Let’s go take a look around the rest of the village. Maybe there’s a banking *kiosk* here someplace we can use.”

“Wait. You mean to tell us, you have *enough* money to have a *bank* account?” Cassandra sneers. “Nobody in *our* village has a bank account. And even if we did, the nearest *bank* is a couple days away. That’s why we use *coins* in the village you know. We don’t *have* a kiosk in our village, because it wouldn’t *do* us any good.”

“Yeah, well, we each have, uh, *enough* money anyway,” Thian says with a huge grin. “But, I don’t remember seeing a *bank* sign, or a *kiosk* either when we headed into this village. It could be on one of the other streets I guess. But, usually, they’re pretty *easy* to spot, and usually one of the first buildings when you enter someplace. I really don’t think they *have* a bank or kiosk here inside the mountain.”

“Don’t be *silly*. Of *course* they have a bank or kiosk here. This is a really *large* village, and there are *lots* of people here. We even saw lots of *lights* scattered around, so we know there are lots of *houses* nearby too,” Cassandra says pushing past Thian and Tianna.

Anastasia reaches out to stop Cassandra, but Cassandra just pulls away and strides up to the nearby counter saying, “*Excuse* me. But could you please tell me where the *bank* or banking kiosk is.”

Everyone around them falls quiet, all turning to look at her. Amanda and the others, are suddenly very uncomfortable.

“A *bank*? Here in *Witch Mountain*? Are you *crazy*?” The odd looking witch cackles. The others around her are laughing too. “You know *full* well those kinds of transactions can be *traced* by the Aurors Office.

“Now, *stop* your foolishness and either *buy* something or move along. Really... *very* funny... a *bank*,” the lady and the others around her all laugh again, then go back to what they were doing, leaving a very embarrassed, *red-faced* Cassandra, walking back to the others.

“Oh, *this* isn’t good,” Tia says looking at Tianna as everyone steps out of the shop and onto the walkway. “We don’t *have* any money at all. Well, not *with* us that is. What are we gonna do? We don’t know *how* long we’ll be inside *Witch Mountain*. The only *food* we have, is what’s in the cabin, and the *little* we have in our packs.”

Tianna looks at Anastasia and Cassandra, “Do either of *you* have any, uh, *whatever* kind of money you use here?”

“I’ve got *some*,” Anastasia says reaching into her dress pocket. “It’s not a lot, but *maybe* it will help. Did *you* bring any Cassa?”

“Yeah, but it’s not enough for *everyone*,” she says pulling out what she has and showing it to everyone. Turning to look at Thian and the others, she asks, “If *you*’ve all got *bank* accounts, how come you didn’t bring any money *with* you?”

“It’s a *long* story, which we really can’t go into now,” Tia says looking worried. “Even combining what the *two* of you have, it won’t last for more than a few days or so, once our *food* runs out.”

“Well, maybe we’ll get *lucky* and someone will know where we can find Bellinora,” Amanda says watching a tall woman descending from the sky, wearing a bright violet robe with matching hat. The little lantern on the front of the broom waving as she now hovers just above the ground a few yards away.

“For now, let’s just look around some,” Thian says walking toward the next shop. “If we see somebody that looks *nice*, we’ll ask them if they’ve heard of, or know Bellinora.”

They turn toward the courtyard, and stop as one, all eyes transfixed at the massive tree in the courtyard square. The branches seem to be *moving*, but as they begin walking closer, they see

that the movement is actually *thousands* of glittering fireflies, darting in and out among the leaves.

Shops line both sides of the street, each one with a glowing lantern over its door, illuminating a sign.

“Oh, *look!*” Tia grabs Tianna’s arm and points to a shop a little way ahead. The sign reads, ‘Can’t Wait to Dye, Hair & Nail Shoppe.’ They all laugh and go to look inside.

The tall windows are covered with pictures of men and women, blinking and smiling as their hair keeps changing styles and colors.

They walk closer, and see that a table on the inside of the shop has been pushed up against the window, mirrors of all sizes facing the street. Sadie laughs as she looks at her reflection in one of the smaller mirrors. As Sadie peers in at herself, her reflection keeps changing. She goes from long *blonde* hair, to a dark *red* bob, to a *brilliant* blue pixie cut. She turns her head to one side, then to the other, seeing how the styles look on her. She looks at Tianna and laughs.

Thian walks past them calling out. “Hey... look at *this!* Really *awesome!*” He stopped a couple shops away, the sign over the door reading, ‘Darkwoods Village Hats Emporium, 1001 Hats for Any Occasion! If You’ve Got a Head... We’ve Got You Covered!’

Amanda stops next to him and laughs. They look in the window and see *hundreds* of hats lining the walls, *hanging* from the ceiling and stacked on counters. Amanda recognizes many styles: *bonnets* and berets, *bucket* hats and helmets, *turbans* and Homburgs, caps, balaclavas and even, Amanda is sure of it, something that resembles an odd sort of *cowboy* hat.

“Are those... *crying?*” Amanda looks at Thian in disbelief. Thian turns to where Amanda is pointing. Sure enough, they see hats hanging on the wall, lifelike *eyes* on the brim or crown, red with tears. She looks up at the sign above them which reads, ‘Perfect for a Funeral! Wear ‘em and weep... Even if the recently deceased didn’t deserve it!’

Tianna and Tia join them and point as they see hats for traveling, which come with maps and compasses, hats for *fighting*, which drip a red *blood*-like substance from the brim, along with *wild* and colorful hats for partying, that *hiccup*.

Sadie calls out to them with a giggle. She is looking in the window of a large shop nearby, with a sign reading, ‘Sew Many Clothes & Robes.’

“Oh... they’re so *pretty!*” Sadie’s mouth is open as she looks at bolts of fabric strewn across the display window. Some of the fabrics *shimmer* and glow, some have spots that sparkle, as though *fireflies* are part of the fabric, while still others turn from black, to blue, to *red*, dependent upon how you turn your head.

“Why is that area *empty?*” Cassandra says, pointing to an area in the middle of the window.

“Look!” Anastasia points to a woman coming toward them. The woman smiles at them, reaches down to the area Cassandra had thought was empty, and *looks* as though she is picking up empty air. Her arms now slightly in front of her, palms up. The woman begins to turn away, but catches their bewildered expressions. She hesitates a moment, smiles, and nods her understanding. With one hand, leaving her other arm still sticking out in front of her, takes her wand out of her pocket and *waves* it over the empty space of her outstretched arm. A fabric of *intense* beauty, suddenly appears draped over her arm. She holds out a white label from the spectacular fabric, so they can read it:

‘Fabric spun from the elusive Elemental Air Fairy, the Aeval,

Who, once captured, gives millions of cast-off fairy wings as payment for her release.

‘These wings are carefully woven to create:

The Fabric of Concealment.  
Always Conceals... Never Reveals!’

The lady, smiling at their reactions, turns and walks away.

“That’s *amazing*! I could really use *that*!” Cassandra declares, greedy eyes never leaving the woman approaching the counter with the precious cloth.

“Now *why* would you want that?” Anastasia counters. “That’s got to cost a *fortune* and, besides, why would *you* want to conceal yourself?”

“Are you *kidding*? Can you imagine what I can find *out* about people, when they wouldn’t even *know* I was there? I could make a *fortune*!”

Anastasia looks hard at her friend. Even though Cassandra *is* her best friend, there are times that she just does *not* understand her. She shakes her head and pulls Cassandra away from the shop.

Tia and Sadie are strangely silent as they look in the next shop. The sign reads, ‘What Do You Wand? Wands Made While You Wait.’

The others surrounded them. “I could really *use* another wand,” Thian says fingering his wand.

“Uh... you might want to reconsider getting one *here*, even if we *had* any money... have you *seen* the wands they carry?” Tianna has her forehead pressed up against the window. Thian mimics her, and *immediately* understands what she means. Three cages line the display area. Each cage named the wands within.

‘The Wandering Wand:  
Wands with Chains so They Don’t Go Astray’

Tianna laughs, as she watches wands *throwing* themselves against the cage walls, while others try *desperately* to push themselves between the holes of the cage.

‘The Wand of Fortune:  
Will Always Make Sure Yours isn’t Mis!’

Cassandra has a strange, *eager* look in her eyes as the wands make small pots of gold appear, then looks disappointed as they dematerialize.

‘The Never Wand:  
Will Never Get Your Spell Wrong!’  
‘Just Created!’

The A.T.C. Wand:  
The Wand You Need When You Can’t Decide Which Spell to Use...  
All Things Considered... It Will Decide For You!’

This cage prompts the most interest. A *spectacular* hologram of two figures play the same scene repeatedly. One, a *sinister*-looking man wearing a black cloak and hood, withdraws a wand and points it menacingly at the hologram of a boy. As he does so, the boy looks *scared* and closes his eyes, like he is praying. The next moment, the boy’s wand *pulls* his arm up and *blasts* the threatening man to bits.

On the bottom edge of the cage is a large label:

‘Confused by so many spells?  
Is your memory not what it used to be?  
Do you have a hard time making quick decisions?  
Often find yourself in a precarious position and unsure of what to do?  
Tired of visiting the Mendors to have your various bodily parts put back together?  
Don’t fret... get the A.T.C. wand (All Things Considered) today!  
And let your wand decide for you!  
Never make another wrong decision!’

“I could use *that*!” Thian says, looking at these last wands with keen interest.  
Tianna looks at Thian shaking her head. “Ow!” Thian says as she *smacks* him in the arm.  
“Why’d you do *that*?”

“Remember what happened the *last* time you decided to get a new wand?”

Thian opens his mouth to say something, then with his eyes growing large, shuts it for a moment, then says, “Well *yeah*, but...”

Tianna ignores him and starts to cross the street as Sadie runs up to her. Thian rubs his arm and follows Tianna, looking back at the A.T.C. wands wistfully.

Tia and Amanda look at one another and smile, as Amanda pats at her eyebrow, as if to check to see if it is *still* there. They laugh again, then move up to either side of Thian. “You don’t *need* those wands, Thian,” Amanda says kindly. “You’re really *good* with wand-work.”

Thian sighs, gives one last bittersweet look behind him and smiles back at Amanda. “I *liked* that store. It would have been fun to go in and at least *try* a few out. Was always a *hoot* before.” They all laugh, remembering Thian’s *last* adventures in a wand shop.

They walk around the other side of the street, looking at those shops, then go down an alley to the next row of shops behind them, on another street further back.

The first building they come to is *large*, painted dark blue, with steps leading up to a bright *pink* double door.

A large sign is nailed above the doors which read, ‘Where the Cat was Dragged Inn - to.’

Sadie giggles. They keep moving and soon find themselves standing in front of a dark, *dreary* little shop. It looks closed.

They read the swinging sign under the portico, ‘Spit & Shine Shoe Repair.’

“I wonder how *business* is...” Thian muses out loud, looking at his dirty boots.

Amanda peers in. She turns to Thian with a grin. “*Booming*. Not an *empty* spot anywhere...”

They hurry on, looking at the shops on this street, which bent around behind the others they had already seen.

The next shop has the same type of exterior as the previous one.

The sign reads, ‘Casket’s Shoes -The last pair you’ll ever need!’

“Wow,” Thian says looking at the sign. “Looks like the owner has ‘em *comin’* and *goin’*.”

Amanda and Tia laugh along with Thian.

The next business makes them all stop and consider. It looks *identical* to the previous two.

The sign reads, ‘D’Mise, Graves & Sons Funeral Home. You Do Your Part and We’ll Do Ours. Visit our Childcare Center for the Kids!’

Thian looks up at the swinging sign, turns and looks back, then looks at Tia and Amanda. They are all *thinking* the same thing.

They move on to the next street behind what they have already seen. There is quite some distance between the area of the *last* shops and these new ones. The shops are beginning to thin out, and are getting spaced further and further apart, as they stretch into the distance toward the tree line of the forest.

As they approach the next shop, the sound of high-pitched *howls* assaults them. Once they can read the sign from the very dim light of the little lantern over the door, they know why.

The sign reads, ‘The Dead Kat Market & Meat Bizarre. Watch ‘Em Squeal... Then Get Your Meal! Butchered While You Wait!’

The sign is bizarrely pretty, letters in rainbow colors against a bevel-cut oval frame of marble.

“Can we go in and *watch* for a while?” Cassandra asks, looking in the window, her eyes glinting.

“What is the *matter* with you?” Anastasia says pulling her away.

“Look!” Sadie says, pointing to the last shop on the street which does not have any windows, and runs toward it. Tianna, running after her, is followed closely by Thian, Tia and Amanda, then Cassandra and Anastasia.

When Amanda gets to the shop, she looks at the sign which reads, ‘Krystal Ball’s Crystals. You sure you want to know...?’

“I bet *she* ‘ll know something about Bellinora!” Tianna says excitedly walking toward the door. She twists the knob and pulls, but it is locked. “Oh no! By the *Lord* and Lady, I don’t *believe* it!” Tianna steps back from the door, frowning at it, as though she could will it open with her look alone.

“Here... let *me* try!” Cassandra says pushing past Tianna. Cassandra twists the knob hard, then shakes it. Nothing. She then *pounds* on the door with her fist.

“*Stop* that!” Tianna says pulling her away. “You can’t *strong-arm* your way in, you know! They’re just *closed* is all.”

“Yeah? So what do we do *now*, if you’re so *smart*?” Cassandra growls, the corner of her mouth twisting up as she crosses her arms.

Tianna walks past her and looks at the sign. “It’s *closed*. So...” she turns back to Cassandra, “we keep looking around for a while. If we don’t see anything tonight that looks promising, we’ll just come back in the *morning* and ask around then. *That’s* what we’re going to do!” She extends her hand to Sadie, who takes it immediately, and they turn their backs to Cassandra.

“Well, this is *just* great!” Cassandra moans and turns to the others. “I don’t know where she thinks *she’s* going!”

“Well, *wherever* she’s going, *we’re* going too. Wanna *come*?” Amanda is getting tired of Cassandra’s tone and makes her feelings known.

Cassandra unwraps her arms and starts to say something, then stops as she looks into Amanda’s fixed and unblinking eyes. Cassandra blinks and lowers her eyes, unable to hold Amanda’s steady gaze.

“Sorry,” Anastasia says quietly to Amanda, as she takes Cassandra’s arm and moves her away from Amanda and the others.

“Okaaay, then,” Thian says, looking at Amanda and smiling. “Let’s go.”

They walk past these shops, then further away from the main square, following a pathway as it curves to the right, toward more shops in the distance. They soon see shops with hanging lanterns next to or above their doors, but decide to keep walking.

They pass fewer and fewer people on their way, some looking back over their shoulders as they walk past, others giving them *curious* glances as they walk around them.

“We’re *definitely* catching peoples’ attention,” Tia says, turning around to see passers-by watching them. “But I’m not sure *why*. We *look* pretty much like everybody else.”

“They look even *dirtier* than most of the others we’ve seen,” Cassandra says, her expression showing disgust as she nods to several people walking nearby.

“Uh... Cassa... I don’t think *we* should talk...” Anastasia says, looking down at her soiled dress.

“No. It’s *different*. I mean, these people *look* dirtier and... *meaner*,” Cassandra says pointedly.

After another four blocks of scattered shops, the shops become increasingly sparse. Trees begin to fill in the open spaces. It becomes *much* darker as the night draws on.

“We haven’t really seen *anybody* we want to ask about Bellinora yet, or anyplace we want to stop in and *ask* either,” Tia says looking behind her. “Should we go back to the cabin and start again tomorrow?”

“No use going back yet, since we’ve come so far,” Tianna sighs, looking back at the long stretch of open space they just traveled. “Let’s keep going a bit longer, and see what else we can find. Maybe we’ll *still* find someplace, or someone who’ll tell us where Bellinora is, or, at least how to *find* her.” She looks down at Sadie. “Shall we move on a little longer, Miss Sadie?” Sadie nods solemnly.

Amanda looks behind her where the twinkling lights now look like pinpricks. She realizes the streets have vanished, and they are now far from the main village. The area around them is almost *completely* deserted. Shops are more scarce and harder to see as they peek-a-boo with the many dark trees.

Walking for quite some distance into the darkening night, Anastasia suddenly stops. “Look.” She points to what looks like it may be one of the *last* two shops before actually reaching the tree line of the massive forest. With a move of her head, the others all turn in the direction she indicates.

Leaning carelessly against the doorway of a shop, almost *hidden* between the low overhanging branches of a tree, is a tall man wearing a long, *black* cloak, the hood pulled far down over his face. The sputtering light of the lantern over the door, shows his arms are crossed, one near his face. A thin waft of *white* smoke floats in front of the little that can be seen of his face.

The thought crosses Amanda, that if the door’s lantern had not been lit, he would have been just another shadow.

Amanda suddenly catches two pinpricks of light moving around his legs, appearing then disappearing. As she squints, she realizes a *cat* is weaving its way between his legs. The man holds an arm down. The cat *jumps* and runs up his arm as the man straightens, to perch itself on his shoulder. The cat has to be as *black* as the night, for the only thing showing are its two *glowing* eyes.

“Should, uh, we ask *him* about Bellinora?” Anastasia asks in a whisper, every syllable begging not to.

“No,” Tianna says in a hushed tone, holding Sadie tighter. “Uh, let’s wait and find someone else okay.”

Everyone seems relieved as they keep their distance and walk on past. Everyone except... *Amanda*. She keeps looking at him and notices that he turns his head, then body, following their progress toward the tree line.

“What *is* it about him?” Amanda thinks as she turns back to the others. A question pops into her mind, “No *question* he’s been watching us. But for *how* long?” He only stands there and yet, seems *threatening* somehow. Thinking about the cat... Amanda looks back and is *startled* to see empty space. He and the cat... are *gone*.

Still looking behind her, Amanda bumps into Thian when he abruptly stops. His chin shoots up. His eyes close as he inhales deeply. His stomach *growls* loudly. “Mmm... do you *smell* that? Where’s that coming from?”

“There... up ahead... I see some *lights* near the tree line,” Cassandra turns to the others. “See them? I bet someone’ll be *there* for sure, and maybe we can ask *them* about Bellinora. *Race* ya!” Cassandra runs ahead, quickly followed by the others.

Laughing and out of breath, they stop in front of what is *indeed*, the last shop before the tree line. They look up at the dilapidated building. There is a worn sign, dangling from one peg with an old *rusted* and filthy lantern flickering dimly over the door. They all have to *squint* up at the dirty and dusty sign which reads, ‘The Rat Hol, Brewe Pub & Eateri, ‘Eat ‘til Ya Bust!’

Weeds creep up the buckled stairs and fight for purchase with small *rats* that force their way through holes between the splintered wooden planks, looking for *food* scraps, sending Sadie scooting behind Tianna.

Two small windows, one on each side of the door, are *thick* with years of grime, yellowed and *crusted* with a dark brown substance in the corners, which has attracted a large number of *spiders*.

As revolting as the outside looks, there is no doubt, that the most *mouth-watering*, tantalizing smells are coming from inside. Thian is torn between *revulsion* and his stomach aching for nourishment.

Cassandra gingerly side-steps up the porch and rubs her hand *briskly* against the grimy window, trying to see inside. “*Snarkins*, it looks worse *inside*!”

She cries out and *jerks* away from the window as a large *spider* lands on her hand. She shakes it off quickly, rubbing her hand against her dress, when Thian comes up the stairs to stand beside her.

“Let *me* see too.” He looks through the window pane that Cassandra has smeared. “The window’s so *dirty*, it’s hard to see much of *anything*. Listen, I don’t know about any of you, but I’m really *thirsty*. I brought a few coins from my mom and dad’s cabin, which my dad had gotten from some guy years ago, for some work he did for him. I *think* I’ve got enough for all of us... for a *drink* anyway.” They are all tired and thirsty, and so quickly agree. Thian steps around Cassandra.

As Thian reaches for the broken door handle, the door *flies* open, smacking him *square* in the face. Thian falls backward against Cassandra, then lands *hard* on the porch, as three men stumble out. The men *roughly* push against Cassandra, and stumble past Thian as they share a dark *bottle* between them, talking loudly, their speech *slurred* and interrupted by each trying to out *belch* the other.

Tianna pulls Sadie behind her, moving aside to let them pass as they reach the bottom of the stairs, as do the others.

“Hey! Didn’t you *see* me?” Cassandra yells at them, her hands on her hips.

The men stop talking and, as one, *turn* toward her. They glance down at Thian, surprised to see him there and quickly ignore him.

Their smell is *nauseating*... a combination of liquor, dirt, *sweat* and something that had *died* some time ago. The smallest of the men is wearing an ill-fitting jacket covered in dirt, heavily stained both front and back.

The man's bloodshot eyes narrow as he sees Cassandra. "*Wha' ya say, dearie?*" he spits out, swaying closer. The other men laugh. He smiles at Cassandra, showing a few dark yellow teeth in a black hole. Thick, *yellow* spittle runs down the side of his mouth. He runs his tongue against the drool, while slowly looking Cassandra up and down, with a hungry expression.

Cassandra drops her hands. She looks at the scarred face of the man, wiry bristles against his *flushed* skin and swallows hard. "Nothing... I, I just meant..." she wavers as the man moves in front of her.

"Meant *wha'?* *Huh*, dearie?" his eyes once again slowly gliding over her curved form.

Cassandra takes a step back as the man advances, enjoying the play. "Never mind. I'm... I'm *sorry*," she says and tries to move to his side, but as she moves, he blocks her.

"Aw... *leave* her be Stimson. She ain't got enough *meat* on her to make it worthwhile," the tallest of the men says as he hiccups.

"I dunno... looks like she got '*nuf* to me," Stimson says turning to the others.

Thian gets up, and moves to Cassandra's side. "*Leave* her alone okay. She didn't mean anything. We don't want any *trouble* with you okay."

Stimson looks at Thian. Never taking his eyes off him, he says, "Hear tha', Gorth? This *boy*... he don' wan' no *trouble* with us," mimicking Thian's tone.

Gorth, the tallest and *meanest* looking of the men, pulls his wand from within his jacket. It is thick, black and looks like *trouble*. "Yeah, I *heard* 'im."

Gorth walks forward, threatening to collapse the wood plank flooring with each step, and stands next to Stimson, while the *third* man turns toward Amanda and the others. "Musache, *watch* them others. We wan' to have us a little *talk* with her boyfriend, here."

Musache, shorter than Gorth, but wider and heavier, first looks at Tianna, then Tia, then eyes Anastasia and Amanda.

Sadie peeks around Tianna's legs, and as she does so, Musache sees her and grins. "Sure. I *watch* 'em. Take your time," and slowly walks down the stairs. The girls back away, and as they do, Amanda slowly reaches down and slips her wand from its holster.

Neither Thian nor Cassandra can reach for their wands without being noticed. Thian moves back into Cassandra, who moves back until her back is pressed against the Pub's wall. Thian's heart is *pounding* as he breaks into a cold sweat. He realizes this is going to be *bad*, and as he frantically looks around, realizes there is *no* one he can call for help. He steals a look at Amanda, and sees she has her wand out.

With some hope, Thian turns his head back to the men advancing toward him, ready to try and reason with them. As Thian opens his mouth, Stimson's fist *slams* into Thian's stomach, knocking the wind from him. He buckles under the impact and *drops* to his knees. Cassandra screams and quickly tries to move away, sliding against the wall.

"Not much of a *boyfriend*, are ya' now?" Stimson laughs, looking down at Thian. "Think you're her... *protector*, do 'ya," and kicks Thian in the stomach, as Thian tries to get to his feet.

Thian gasps and drops again, curling into a ball. "*Leave* him alone!" Tianna screams.

Musache advances. "Or *wha'?*" he says, smiling a deadly smile as he pulls a *huge* knife from under a fold in his robe.

Cassandra is frozen in place and cannot move. She looks down at Thian and sees Stimson kick him again. She starts to whimper, and turns to run, when a heavy arm *grabs* her hair from behind, stopping her. She *screams*.

“Or *this!*” Amanda yells, raising her wand toward Musache. But she is not *quick* enough. He sees the movement out of the corner of his eye, and with a whispered spell, Amanda’s wand *flies* out of her hand, landing several yards away.

Just as Stimson readies to kick Thian a *third* time, a whirl of *black* shadow and wind engulf them all. Gorth, Stimson and Musache look all around them, *clearly* confused and *frightened*.

Musache is the first to drop, his wand and knife *vanishing* into thin air. Suddenly, through the isolated tornado-like wind, *rope* appears from thin air, first binding him from shoulders to ankles, then *gags* him.

Amanda looks around, confused and frightened herself, as no one seems to be there.

Gorth yells and advances toward Musache, but is *tripped* as he runs down the stairs. The black wind swirls violently, and is upon Gorth, who *screams* as he is bound by rope as well. His scream is cut short, as a black cloth *wraps* around his mouth, cutting short his scream as *he* is gagged as well. His body is unceremoniously *dumped* next to the writhing Musache.

Stimson, seeing what is happening, shoves Cassandra roughly out of his way and runs to the side of the building, *jumping* down the porch. Getting to his feet, he has only gone a short distance, when Amanda sees the black wind *lift* him off his feet, and as he *wriggles* in the air, the black wind brings him over to the other two, *bound*, but not gagged. Stimson drops to the ground next to the other two, then rolls onto his back, looking up with wide *frightened* eyes.

Thian is still on the floor as Tia, Tianna and Sadie run to him. Anastasia runs to Cassandra. Amanda looks at what has just happened, and knows she is witnessing *extraordinary* Wizitch. The only trouble is, she cannot see who, or *what* is actually doing it.

“Aw, *Wind Rider*, we didn’ *mean* nothin’!” Stimson yells. “Let us *be!* You kin ‘*av* the girl! Take her, aw *right!*’ She weren’t no good *anyway!* It was jus’ some *fun*, thas all!”

The black swirling tornado turns inward on itself, as black *fabric* spins high into the air, then slowly stops whirling around and changes form.

Everyone is *mesmerized* as a tall man materializes, between the swirling material of his long, black cloak. He walks over to the men and looks down at them, as he throws his hood back. “Now haven’t I told you boys *over* and over again, that I just don’t *like* your type of fun? *Haven’t I?*”

Stimson stammers as he looks up at the man he calls Wind Rider, clearly frightened. “Come on, Wind Rider, *let* us go... we’ll leave ‘em alone. I *swears*... I *swears!*”

The tall man walks around the three on the ground. “Hmmm... you *swear*, Stimson?”

“Yeah... *yeah*, I do! I do! Oh, *thanks* sir!” Stimson looks relieved. “For a minute, I was thinking that you might jus’... *make* us go back to that cave with the *Vorla*... bu’ you wouldn’t do *tha’* again to us! Them *Vorla*, they’re *crazy!* They almos’ *killeded* us they did! Nah... you... you wouldn’t do *tha’* again, huh, Wind Rider, uh, *Mr. Rider*. Jus’ let us go, and we’ll be *outta* here... I *swear!*”

“The *Vorla*... I forgot about them... until *you* just mentioned it. How did you get away from them anyway? Well, never mind... but since you *swear*...” He brings his right arm up, holding a black wand, and speaks a spell that Amanda and the others cannot make out. With a sudden *rush* of wind, the three men are *gone*.

The tall man turns looking directly at Amanda. He has a strong face, young and yet *old* at the same time. It is a face that has seen *many* realms, *scarred* to attest to the many battles he has survived.

For some reason, Amanda likes him. Their eyes meet and she smiles as he gives a small bow.

He turns, walks a short distance and retrieves Amanda's wand. After presenting it to her, he moves up the stairs and helps Thian up.

"This can be a *dangerous* place. You need to watch your *step* around here," he says to Thian, "and your *tongue*!" turning to look at Cassandra, who blushes a fierce red and turns away.

"Thank you... Mr. ... Mr. ... *Rider*, for helping us... we... we..." Tianna stammers, feeling strange as she searches for words.

"We *saw* you back there," Amanda says pointing back along the open area, to the other small building. "I was watching you and then... you *disappeared*."

The man smiles. "Good thing *I* was watching too."

He lifts his head as though he hears someone calling his name, but no sound is on the air. Nodding, he brings his hood quickly back down over his face. "You'll be safe... for *now*. I've got to go... my feline friend is calling."

"Your... *cat*?" Amanda asks quickly.

"No, not *mine*, unfortunately. She is *bound* to a very dear friend." He catches sight of Sadie smiling at him, and he smiles back, a look of recognition crossing his face. "I know your people well, Miss. I lived with them for a short time. They are a *great* and powerful people. I hope to see them again."

Sadie moves closer to him. "They called you... Wind Rider... is that your name?"

"It's what I'm called here. But I have *many* names... it changes as I travel through the realms. My given name is Melteme."

"I thought you were just a *story*, or a legend or something. I didn't know you were *real*."

Sadie looks more intently at the man and speaks quietly:

"Faster than fire or water that flows  
Strongest of all who wreak havoc and woe.  
Faster than thought, and stronger than might  
My anger is fearsome and quick to ignite.  
I surround you... pursue you... you cannot escape  
Your actions alone will determine your fate."

Sadie speaks the last sentence quieter still.

The man completes the poem for her:

"Look hard if you dare for I ride on the air  
The Wind Rider comes... so now beware.  
Look hard if you dare for I ride on the wind  
When the Wind Rider comes, he best be your friend."

He smiles at Sadie and tousles her hair, as dust from her matted hair rises into the cool night air, while a clump of dirt falls to the ground. He nods to the others, then walks down the stairs and away from them. Somewhere between the *Pub* and the next distant building, he *melts* into the darkness and vanishes.

No one speaks at first. Then Thian looks back at the Pub. “We were *lucky*. Uh, I’m really not so thirsty anymore. Let’s finish looking around here, then get back to the cabin okay?”

Amanda asks worriedly, “Thian, are you okay? We can go back *now* if you want. They *hurt* you pretty bad. We can always come back in the morning you know.”

“Nah. I’m okay. A little *sore* maybe. They just got the *jump* on me is all... *I* could’ve handled ‘em... mostly.”

Tianna and Tia hug Thian, and walk a little distance from the pub to see if they can see any shops they have not spotted.

A strangely quiet Cassandra walks arm-in-arm with Anastasia, following them.

Amanda follows, every so often looking back over her shoulder when she feels a breeze, hoping to see the tall man still keeping an eye on them.

“What’s *that*?” Tia asks, a small fear prickling at her words.

“*Lights*... up ahead between the trees,” Tianna says.

“Oh great, not *again*!” Thian says shaking his head.

“Well, let’s go have a *quick* look as long as we’ve come this far,” Tianna says and leads the way.

Sadie moves closer to Tianna who holds her hand tightly. No one speaks as they walk, even Cassandra seems at a loss for words.

There is only open space here, with the occasional majestic trees scattered about, but growing closer together, the closer to the tree line they get.

As they get to the tree line, the trees look as *old* as the realm itself. They are approaching a wide tunnel in the trees, made by the arching branches.

Amanda looks above her, and sees the tree’s branches are curved far above them forming a dense arching canopy, meeting in the middle like clasped hands. After they have walked in a ways, Amanda turns and looks behind her. It looks as though they have walked into a *dark* tunnel, the path they are on only some thirty feet across.

As Amanda looks further into the dark in front of her, she thinks her eyes are playing tricks on her. The tunnel of trees seem to *race* toward her for a moment, as though she were looking through a zoom telephoto lens. An image, like something *lurking* in the shadows, appears for a brief moment, then the scene *zooms* back, once again becoming just the darkened tunnel within the trees. Feeling disconcerted, she shakes her head to try to clear it, and looks forward at her friends. The strange effect is gone.

It is dark here... *very* dark. Where the courtyard had been blazing with lights from fireflies, as well as lanterns at every shop, there are almost *no* lights here... nor *sounds*.

It is as though they have entered another realm.

“The *Legend* of Sleepy Hollow,” Amanda says aloud.

“What?” Tia asks, looking at Amanda, obviously startled at the sudden sound.

“Oh, sorry. I just remembered what this road *reminds* me of. It’s a *kid’s* story back on... well, where *I* come from. It’s called The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, and this road reminds me of the *scary* road that the character, Ichabod Crane, was on before he almost *lost* his head... or maybe he *did* lose his head...don’t remember.”

“And this is a *kid’s* story?” Tia asks in disbelief. “Wow... your realm must be a *scary* place for kids, if *that’s* a story you tell ‘em!”

Amanda thinks for a moment. “I never really thought about that before. But, yeah, it *can* be a scary place for kids...” thinking about her own past.

They look from side to side and see small shops cloistered between the trees, barely visible in the deep blackness. They look rundown and seedy.

“Look... there are *lights* glowing between some of those trees down there,” Cassandra says turning to the others, pointing down a *small* pathway that turns off to the side, and showing another tunnel made within the dense trees.

“It *looks* like that sign down there says something about... *Apothecary*. You know... *herbs* and stuff witches use for *spells*, potions and things. Let’s just go see what it is. *Maybe* we can find out about *Bellinora*, and then we can get *back* to the cabin!”

There is a small sign at the intersection of the two paths. It must have fallen from the tree it had been nailed to *ages* ago, pointing to the new side path. But it is *so* dark, and with the sign almost *completely* covered in vines, no one sees it.

The dim lights lead them to the small shop. A dingy sign decorated with something resembling a Venus *Fly* Trap near the door reads, ‘Master Apothecary. Potions, Medicines and Poisons. Cure Your Ills and Ill Your Cures.’

Cassandra hesitates for a moment, then tries the door but it is locked. “I don’t *believe* this!” and turns to her right facing Tianna. “What should we do *now*?”

“I don’t *like* it here. I know we need to see if we can find somebody who knows Bellinora, but, I don’t *like* this place at *all*. I think we should just *get* the heck out of here and come back *tomorrow* in the daylight.”

They start to turn around to leave when Cassandra says, “Wait! *Look*, there’re a couple more lights down *there*,” pointing further along the dark tunnel. “Since we’re here *anyway*, and you say you *really* need to find Bellinora, let’s just *finish* looking at those last few shops, *then* we can get the heck out of here. I’m with *you* for once,” looking at Tianna. “This place gives me the *creeps*!”

Without waiting for a response, Cassandra turns and begins walking quickly down the new tunnel of trees, moving further into the *suffocating* darkness.

After a moment, Thian shrugs and heads off after her, the others soon jogging to catch up.

A *midnight* black cat edges out from the brush and vines at the intersection to the path they are now heading down. The cat watches them *curiously* for a few moments, then spots another cat some distance away, scampering across the pathway into the darkness of the trees.

The black cat *springs* forward, chasing off after the other cat.

As it does so, it rubs its body against the old vine covered sign resting on the ground, uncovering the faded words... *Shadow Alley*.

## Shadow Alley

[To TOC](#)

They walk on, the close call at the Pub weighing heavily on their minds as each wonders what they will face next.

*Chills* slide up and down Amanda's arms and back... chills she feels *sure* are not from the warmth of the day, making way for the cold of the night. She does *not* like the looks of this pathway.

Looking behind her for the *tenth* time in two minutes, she is *sure* someone is following them. But every time the feeling overwhelms her, she turns around, ready to confront someone she is sure is about to *snatch* her, only to find no one there.

Looking over her shoulder yet again, Amanda almost *jumps* out of her skin when Tia *grabs* her arm. "Look," pointing with her head to a dark area next to a run-down building just a short way down the pathway. Amanda looks in the direction Tia indicates, not seeing anything at first, then a *shifting* within the dark shadows tells her *someone* is standing there. Turning to Tia, she nods her acknowledgment.

"I don't think our luck would hold with whoever *that* is being another Wind Rider... do you?" Tia whispers.

Amanda looks at Tia and shakes her head slightly.

Slowly making their way further along the path, Amanda sees *several* pairs of eyes shining in the complete darkness between buildings on both sides of the pathway. As Amanda turns to look at Thian and Tianna, she notices *they* are looking at the dark space between the buildings they are approaching. Amanda sees a pair of *shining* eyes in the shadows. Something *glints* just below them for a brief moment. The eyes *blink* out, and all goes dark. Amanda swallows hard, then turns to look ahead.

Tianna and Thian are speaking *quietly* to one another when Thian turns around and whispers, "Everyone keep your *eyes* and ears open. We seem to, uh, be generating a *lot* of interest."

"Well, at *least* we won't have to worry about those three *idiots* that the Wind Rider took care of back there, you *know*?" Cassandra says, sounding as though she had a hand in their rescue.

Tianna turns around, her eyes shooting fire. She is just about to say something when Anastasia beats her to it. "*Shhh!* Don't *talk* so loud! We may not have to worry about *them*, Cassa, but I have a feeling there are *others* around here that are *just* like them."

Cassandra makes a dramatic show of looking around. "*I* don't see anyone around here! It's like the place is *deserted* or something... like people are *afraid* to come in here or something... and don't *shush* me!"

Thian turns to look at Cassandra. "Just because we don't *see* anyone walking around in here, doesn't mean it's *deserted*..."

He catches Amanda's eye and senses her unease. They lock eyes and in that moment, Thian could *swear* he knows her thoughts. He turns to look into the shadows next to the stores and sees movement. He turns to Amanda and *she* knows he saw it too.

A loud *howl* breaks through the quiet like a *shot* from a cannon, bringing them up short, their hearts *pounding* as they turn to see where the sound came from. Two *cats*, one chasing the other, race around the side of a building up ahead, as a large barrel *tumbles* after them into the deserted pathway. Both cats *hissing* loudly, race past them in a cloud of rising dust.

Sadie gasps and grabs at Tianna, who holds her close. Cassandra jumps behind Anastasia. Amanda, Tia and Thian quickly draw their wands.

“*Cats!*” With heart pounding, Thian gives a short laugh, putting his wand away, as does Tia. He places a comforting hand on Sadie’s shoulder as she looks up at him and smiles.

Cassandra *snorts* as she walks around Anastasia. “Stupid *cats!* I *hate* cats. They’re a *waste* of space!”

“I *like* those animals!” Sadie flashes anger as she rounds on Cassandra. “And they’re *not* stupid!”

Cassandra, *fuming*, opens her mouth, then shuts it quickly when she sees Tianna look at her with a *promise* in her eyes.

Amanda, still holding her wand, turns around to see the cats disappearing around the corner of another building. Turning back, she peers toward the darkened area of the large building from where the cats had come.

Cassandra catches her movement. “What’s the matter *now?* They’re just *cats*. Probably fighting over some stupid *fishbone* or something.”

Amanda is quiet for a moment, feeling even *more* uneasy. But why? “Yeah, maybe they *are* just fighting over a fishbone... or *maybe*...” she thinks looking around.

Quietly, Amanda says, “Maybe it *was* a fishbone. Maybe it’s nothing... I don’t know... but somehow, it just doesn’t *feel* right. I keep thinking that...”

“Oh, puh *leese!* Not *again!* What’s *with* you? It was just two mangy *cats!* Why do you have to make *everything* menacing?” Cassandra faces Amanda looking peeved.

“Hey! Don’t *talk* that way to Amanda!” Thian is livid. His hand goes to his stomach, still sore. He turns to face Cassandra, his face *inches* from hers, breathing hard. “And if your memory is that *short* that you don’t remember what *happened* to us back at the pub... that *you* caused ... which was about as *menacing* as you can get... then you need an Elixir of *Sapience* to get your mind working again!” Cassandra takes a step back bumping into Anastasia.

“I, I didn’t *mean* anything... okay! I just meant...”

“I *know* what you meant, and I’m getting *sick* of it!” Thian’s anger is mounting.

Amanda has never seen Thian like this. Quickly, she puts her wand away and steps in. Pulling Thian away from Cassandra, she says, “Thian... *Thian*... stop! It’s okay. *Really.*”

Tianna puts her hand on Thian’s other arm. “We can’t *afford* to argue with each other Thian, especially not *here*. It’s taking our focus away from where we need it. And...” she looks at Amanda, then at the darkened buildings edging them, her voice lowering, “we’re being *watched.*”

Thian looks at Tianna, then Amanda, his breathing quieting. He turns away from Cassandra without another word, puts his hand on Sadie’s shoulder, and starts to walk on.

Anastasia puts her hand gently on Cassandra’s arm. Cassandra looking sour, *pulls* away. Anastasia sighs, shrugs and walks on next to Tia.

There is an uneasy truce between them all as they make their way onward. It’s getting darker and *colder*. Dim lights can be seen flickering in some of the buildings, though no one wants to stop and peer inside.

They had just seen another *Apothecary* sign further along the alley and want to see if the shop is open, and if someone *there* knows a great witch by the name of Bellinora. They decide that if *no* one knows her, they would get the *heck* out of there, coming back in the morning to ask around.

Amanda looks from side to side, searching the shadows neighboring the buildings, her eyes *slicing* through the darkness.

She swears shadows are actually *shifting* within shadows, sending a chill up her spine.

The only sound seems to be their footsteps *crunching* on the gravel of the pathway... and yet, there is *something* more. She *knows* it... she *feels* it... she *smells* it. She blinks hard. "Smells it?" she thinks. Her heart skips a beat. The smell - *that* smell. The smell of *threats*... of *fear*... of impending *pain*.

The memory races through her mind, as she is taken back to the basement closet in the orphanage she hid in when she was little, hearing the *footsteps* of the kids that were looking for her, *searching* for her... the thrill of the hunt to find her, *beat* her as they laughed. And as she waited for them to find her, the *smell* of the closet impaled itself into her mind. She'll *never* forget that smell.

A slight sound suddenly *snatches* her from the nightmare of the past and back to the present. She shivers as she feels the sweat run down her neck, and along her spine.

The pathway, the buildings, the *night*... all are altogether foreboding.

They walk on and still no one speaks, as though their very words will draw danger to them.

The feeling of *dread* grows in Amanda as her breathing becomes shallow. She has an overwhelming feeling that if she turns around, she will confront that *very* danger. Not being able to stand it another second, she *snatches* her wand, spins around quickly, *dropping* into a low crouch and faces... an *empty* pathway.

"Got to get a *grip*, girl," she mutters to herself, shaking her head as she puts her wand away. She winces as she is assaulted by the smell again, *heavier* this time, more potent. The hairs on the back of her neck suddenly *stand* on end.

"Where you all headed?" a deep voice booms from behind Amanda.

Amanda *snaps* her head around so fast her *neck* cricks. The others stop and spin around as one, Tianna pushing Sadie behind her as she draws her wand. Cassandra quickly moves behind Anastasia and Tia, as they pull *their* wands. Thian moves to stand next to Amanda, his wand gripped tightly in his hand.

They see a *figure* wrapped completely in a black cloak. A tall, *pointed*, wide-brimmed hat is settled deep over his eyes. The only thing visible are his *silver* teeth, smiling at them.

Amanda thinks wildly, her heart ready to *explode* out of her chest. "The *smell* is coming from... *him*! Where did he *come* from? He wasn't there when I looked... *no* one was there when I looked around!"

No one answers the stranger.

"Now, *now*... those *cats* get your tongues, did they?" He asks, smiling even more broadly.

"Who *are* you? *What* do you want?" Thian asks aggressively, his stomach starting to throb again.

In a slow, calm voice, the stranger says, "I don' want *nothin'*. Jus thought that you all might need some directions... some help. Ya all don' look like you're *from* roun' here. Jus' offerin' some *help*, thas all." He shrugs carelessly. "But... if you wanna *keep* goin' and maybe go somewhere's ya *shouldn'*... then *thas* up to you," he says, making no movement to leave.

"What do you mean, 'somewhere we *shouldn't*'? *You* don't know where we're going, so why would you even *say* that?" Tianna's voice sounds braver than she feels.

The Black Stranger gives a deep humorless laugh. "You all headed *straight* up da path, it looks to me. No *stopping*, no *looking* in the buildings. You all been headed *straight* up this here pathway since you came *into* *Shadow Alley*. Not too many of *us* do tha', knowing whas *up* ahead. So... jus' being *friendly*... thought I migh' *offer* my assistance..." The Black Stranger tilts his head toward the sky and still his face is hidden, "*specially* on a nigh' like... *this*." He turns his head to the group but still does not move.

“Well... what’s *ahead* that we, uh, might need *help* with?” Amanda asks, her wand hand shaking slightly.

“Oh... *lots*, little lady.” His head finds each one in the small group. He speaks quietly, deliberately, drawing out each word. “*Quick* with them wands of yours, I see. *Umm... umm... umm... drawin’* wands in *Shadow Alley*... *umm... umm... umm*,” he continues shaking his head slightly. “Good way to get yaself *killed* in these parts... ‘*specially* in these parts.”

No one speaks. No one moves. The silence wraps its *thunderous* voice around each in the group, until the air itself seems to *vibrate* with its intensity.

Amanda knows this danger... *recognizes* it. Tightening the grip on her wand, she steels herself. “We’ll *take* our chances and keep our wands *out* for now. Now... what do you *really* want and why would we need your help?”

The Black Stranger slowly turns toward Amanda. “Like I said... only wan’ to help. Where you all goin’? I *migh’* be goin’ in the same direction. I could *take* you there... keep you... *safe*. You’re ‘n a place that... well... can *harm* the unwary, the *unprepared*. Folks can go... *missin’* here in *Shadow Alley*,” he chuckles. “Only few of us go *straight* up the path - but if thas where you all goin’, I can make sure you all *get* there... *together*... *safe*... an’ in one *piece*, so to speak.”

Sadie looks around Tianna’s legs and moves out to stand next to her. The movement catches the Black Stranger’s attention. “Well... well... *well*. Now *what* do we have here?”

Amanda turns around quickly and sees Sadie looking defiantly at the stranger. Turning back, Amanda gets ready to *attack* if he takes so much as a *step* toward Sadie.

But the Black Stranger does not move. It is as though he *knows* her thoughts, and remains as still as stone.

Still looking at Sadie, the Black Stranger tilts his head slightly as if considering something. “Now... this *here* changes things. You all are one thing, bu’ that little *girl*... *umm... umm... umm... well* now, *she’s* quite another, *ain’t* she? Didn’t *see* her before.”

He turns back to Amanda. “Up ‘head is an area we call... the *Abyss*. Not nice. No, not *nice* at all... ‘*specially* for little girls. You all won’ make it past that big *tree* yonder. You all bein...’ *watched* ... *been* watched ever since you turned *into Shadow Alley*.

“But once you all come strollin’ in *here*... headin’ *straight* up this here path, like it weren’t *nothin’*... you all bein’ watched *real* close... ‘*specially* since ya all a headin’... *straight* for the *Abyss* yonder there.”

Amanda looks where the Black Stranger is indicating, and notices that the Apothecary shop is *two* shops on the other side of what he calls the *Abyss*. She shudders as she sees three men, wrapped *completely* in black cloaks, dash across the pathway, disappearing into the *shadows* between two shops beyond the *Abyss*, *just* before the Apothecary shop. Amanda forces down a dry swallow, then nervously turns back to him.

“Like *you* watched us?”

“*Jus’* like me. An’ a whole lot *worse* than me,” the Black Stranger says quickly lowering his voice. “So... you all got a *choice*, as I see it. You can make your *own* way on...”

“Or we can go *back*! You can’t *stop* us!” Cassandra shouts, her voice shaking. Anastasia drops her head and groans.

The Black Stranger *slowly* turns and sees Cassandra standing behind and to the side of Anastasia and Tia. He had not *seen* her before, but now studies her.

“No... you *can’t*,” the stranger answers, a dangerous smile playing in his voice. “You won’ go *two* minutes before ‘em watchin’ eyes’ll *grab* you - ‘*specially* *you*. There’s a good *market* for girls like you.”

Cassandra takes a step back, the color draining from her face.

"Now, where was I... oh yeah," and turns his attention briefly to Sadie, then full to Amanda. His gaze is *so* fierce that Amanda knows he's not looking *at* her, but *into* her. She begins to feel dizzy as he tilts his head slightly from one side to the other.

Slowly nodding to himself, he says, "You *know*... I know *you* know wha' I mean, *don'* ya, little lady?"

Amanda, not answering, holds his gaze steadily. But what he says next, *rocks* her to her very core.

"Jus' like when *you* was small. *Remember?* I *know* you do. *Jus'* like that... but *worse*, so much worse. 'Cause it'll be *all* of 'em here. *All* your friends this time... that they be after now too. And *specially* that little girl back there. Not jus' *you* this time... hiding from them... *waiting* for them to find you... and they *did*, didn't they? You was *never* safe... could *never* hide from them for long, 'specially the *big* one, *Tommy*, right'? Knowing what they'd *do* to you when they found you.

"But *worse* here... so *much* worse now. You're 'n *Shadow Alley*, little lady. Not in some dark *closet*... waitin'... always *waitin'*... for what was comin'. 'Cause like them, they's *here* now... right' now, *hidin'*, waitn'. Close. *Real* close. All around ya in the dark. Ya'll can *feel* their eyes on ya, can't ya? So, *you* decide... you wan' some *help*?"

"I'm just offering my services. I *know Shadow Alley* like the *back* o' m'hand. *Have* to ta survive here. Thas' all. Jus' trying to help. Not many folk 'round here would *offer* ya tha'."

Amanda is *beyond* stunned. She feels everyone's eyes on her. Her wand hand is slick with sweat and *shaking* so badly, she changes hands, which does not help. Her mind screams, "*How* does he *know*? He must be able to look *into* my mind... my memories... my *thoughts*!"

As she watches him, she is taken back to the small, cramped, basement closet of the orphanage... the *smell* of fear... of the *pain* that always came.

The Black Stranger says nothing. He waits for a few moments, shrugs, then turns around and begins walking back into the dark shadows between the buildings where he first appeared.

Amanda's mind is racing. "I *can't* let something happen to the others! Not *Sadie*!" she thinks frantically. Biting her lower lip, she *knows* she has to do something.

Turning, Amanda looks over at Thian's stricken face. Looking pale, he nods. She knows he understands and nods back.

"All right! All right!" Amanda calls after the Black Stranger. "You can come with us. But we want to go *back* to the village. We... we just want to *leave* here."

The Black Stranger stops, as though considering Amanda's words. Turning slowly to face them, he tilts his head slightly and shrugs. "An *leave* here ya will. I sugges' ya all put them *wands* away." Shaking his head slowly, he continues, "Drawn *wands* in *Shadow Alley*... umm... umm... umm. Get ya all *killed* on th' way ou' that will.

"We need ta make a qui' *stop* before leavin'. Get ya all some *lanterns* fo' the long dark walk back to the village. Folks in here, they don' *like* the light much."

They all look nervously at one another, then seeing Thian put his wand away, the others do the same.

The Black Stranger nods as he smiles, his silver teeth glinting in the dim light from a nearby lantern, hanging over a sign tilted at an odd angle making it unreadable.

He walks around them, taking the lead down the pathway. As he passes Sadie, he tips his hat to her. Tianna pulls Sadie quickly behind her, her look as *sharp* as daggers.

Amanda and Thian turn to follow. Thian briefly squeezes her arm, then steps forward to take his place next to Tianna.

Amanda and Tia catch each other's eyes. Neither has a good feeling about this.

They walk on, following the Black Stranger, no one speaking. Amanda wonders if they will make it out or are walking to their *doom*, but she cannot think of anything else to do. After all, she decides, if the man had *wanted* to hurt them, he could have done it *easily* from the shadows, before they would have had a chance to react. But still...

Amanda's mind races, searching for the possibilities of escape, but nothing seems right. "Especially, if somehow, he *knows* my thoughts," she thinks, stumbling over a rock.

The wind rustles through the leaves. Amanda pushes some of her long hair away from her face, and as she does, her hand brushes the necklace. "The *necklace!*" she thinks with a start. She had *forgotten* about the necklace! "But why didn't the necklace *help* us... help *me?*" she thinks furrowing her brows.

Glancing at the Black Stranger, she immediately stops thinking about it, trying to clear her mind of *any* thought of the necklace, and concentrates hard on the wind blowing through the trees... just in case.

They walk along the dark pathway toward the village, until the Black Stranger stops in front of an old, half broken down building. Amanda looks up at the sign above the door:

The Lost Soul  
Ultimate Wizitch Powers Revealed  
What Would You Give to Have Them?  
G. Capp & Associates

The Black Stranger turns around. "We's here. Jus' be a minute ta grab them lanterns. Like I said, folk in them shadows don' *like* the light."

"But... the *sign* in the window says it's *closed!* What are we supposed to do *now?* It's really *dark* out, you know?" Cassandra's voice raises an octave with each sentence. Her panic is evident as running footsteps can be heard from somewhere within the surrounding shadows.

The stranger looks at her for a minute before speaking. "Not *everythin's* as it seems in *Shadow Alley*. It only *says* it's closed for the nigh'. Wait here and I'll get Mr. Capp an' his... *associates*. He'll open the store for *me*, he will, and then... you *leaves* this place. Wai' here." And with a swish of his black cloak, he strides past them, disappearing into the alleyway that borders the store.

After a few moments hesitation, Tianna asks Thian quickly, "What should we do?" fear etched in her face. Thian shakes his head, lost for words.

Another few moments pass, then, "Amanda?" Tia asks, "What do *you* think we should do?"

Amanda shakes her head. "I don't know. And I don't know why my neckla..."

Abruptly, Amanda stops as three men round the corner of the building. There, smiling broadly, stride *Stimson*, *Gorth* and *Musache*, the three who had *attacked* them in front of The Rat Hol Pub.

For a moment, the kids freeze, stunned *speechless*.

Thian snatches his wand from his belt and moves quickly in front of the group, his wand at the ready this time. Amanda joins him, grabbing her wand as well, prepared to *fight*, as does Tia and Tianna.

Stimson and Musache separate, each walking around and *behind* the kids.

“What are *you* doing here?” Cassandra shrieks at the men. “Help! *Stranger... Black Stranger... Help!*” and shrieks even louder.

Anastasia turns to her. “*Shut up, Cassa! Stop!*”

“No, I will *not* shut up! He *said* he would keep us *safe*! We need *help*! Stranger!” and screams even louder.

Cassandra stops screaming as Gorth steps aside, and from behind him is the *Black* Stranger, smiling with his *silver* teeth.

“Oh... you’re *here*! Help us! *Please* help us!” Cassandra yells at him. “We *know* these men, and, and, they’re really *bad*, bad men!”

“Doka’asi y meni,” The Black Stranger says quietly with a wave of his wand. As one, *all* the kids’ wands fly from their hands to him. He catches them all easily, smiling at Cassandra.

“Didn’t I *say* tha’ not everythin’s as it *seems*? Mr. *Capp* here will open his establishment for us now, *won*’ you Mr. *Capp*?”

Gorth smiles widely as he takes a key from his pocket, steps forward and unlocks the door. Stimson cackles, rubbing his hands together as he and Musache, *roughly* begin pushing the kids inside. Once through the doorway, Thian pulls everyone behind him into a tight group and stands in front next to Amanda.

Gorth locks the door and puts the key in his pocket. Taking his wand out, he lights a number of old candles on the wall, while Stimson goes quickly into a back room.

The Black Stranger sits down on a chair in a shadowed corner of the room. The only thing showing are his *silver* teeth.

Cassandra starts to cry. Tianna keeps Sadie behind her.

“What do you *want* with us?” Thian asks grimly.

Returning from the back room, Stimson walks up to Thian and says, “Well, for starters... *this!*” and slams his *fist* into Thian’s stomach. Thian cries out in pain, doubling over from the blow, dropping to his knees. “*Owed* you tha’, didn’ I, ‘cause *you* brung the Wind Rider, and we got *sent* back to them crazy *Vorla*, ‘gain.”

He picks up a large black bag he dropped when he hit Thian, and places it on the table near the Black Stranger. The Stranger places all the kids’ wands inside it.

Amanda kneels down to help Thian. Stimson takes a step forward as Tianna cries out, “*Leave* him alone! He didn’t do *anything* to you!”

“Oh... he didn’ do *nothin*’, did he?” mimicking Tianna’s cry. “Well, *I* say he *did* and he’s gonna learn his *lesson*, ‘is wha’ I say!” Stimson advances toward Thian. He violently pulls Amanda away and shoves Tianna hard, back against the wall.

Stimson grabs Thian by his hair, pulling him up. He hits Thian again, *hard* in the stomach. Thian drops heavily, rolling onto his side and moans. He curls up, holding his stomach. Stimson *kicks* Thian in his upper arm, then his upper leg, as Thian *cries* out in pain.

Tianna *screams* for Stimson to stop and runs at him. Gorth *grabs* her by the waist as she passes him, lifts her off her feet, *flinging* her into a nearby chair. The Black Stranger throws something he pulls from the bag to Gorth, who catches it, and *jams* it into Tianna’s mouth as she springs to her feet. She *instantly* faints, dropping back into the chair, her chin dropping to her chest.

Scared, not knowing *what* else to do, Amanda *bolts* for Stimson. Launching herself into the air, she lands on his back, *locking* her arms tightly around his neck. He staggers for a moment, making *strangling* sounds as he tries to pull her arms from his neck.

Suddenly, Amanda is *flying* backward through the air and *slams* into a wall. Dazed, she slides to the floor. Shaking her head to clear it, she looks up and sees the Black Stranger pointing his wand at her. He mumbles something and she is *thrown* like a rag doll into a nearby chair.

Immediately, she *tries* to get up but finds she is somehow *bound* to the chair. Looking down, she sees *nothing* there, yet her arms and legs are *firmly* restrained. She tries to talk, but finds her arms and legs are not the only *things* bound.

“Anyone *else* feelin’ brave?” Gorth asks, his eyes looking wild and possessed.

Cassandra is whimpering as she makes her way behind Anastasia and Tia, hugging at the wall trying to disappear. Unfortunately for *her*, this just makes her movements more obvious.

“Oh, I remember *you*... you’re the one with the big *mouth*!” Gorth walks over to Cassandra and pulls her away from the wall by her hair. Cassandra screams, holding her head as she is dragged to a table near Tianna. “You got somethin’ to say *now*? Leapin’ *Stumprats*... you *stink* somtn’ *awful*!” Gorth throws her into another chair.

“It wasn’t *me*,” Cassandra cries. “It was... it was... *her*!” and points to Anastasia. Anastasia’s eyes widen as she holds tightly onto Sadie.

Gorth looks at Anastasia, then turning back, *backhands* Cassandra hard across the mouth. Her head is thrown back as blood *spurts* from her split lip. “It *was* you, you *stupid* girl! Wha’? You think I don’t *know* it was you? I was *there*, remember?” and as Cassandra tries to get up, Gorth *backhands* her again, harder. Cassandra slumps down into the chair, half conscious.

Stimson, hearing Thian softly say, “You *cowards*, leave her alone...” begins viciously *kicking* every part of Thian, sending him *writhing* in agony with each assault as the Black Stranger calmly looks on, with an odd crooked grin.

Tia screams, “Stop! *Stop* it! You’ll *kill* him!”

“*Wait*! She migh’ be righ’,” the Black Stranger says calmly. Seeing that Stimson is *crazed* and keeps his assault on Thian, he *snaps* his wand at Stimson, who is thrown backward, slamming *hard* into a wall.

Stimson turns to the Black Stranger, “Aw... why’d you *stop* me, eh... *why*? He had it *comin’* he did! Them *Vorla*!”

“I *thought* we had a plan for ‘em, Stimson... *don*’ we have a plan? Now *why* would you want to go ahead and *spoil* the plan by *killin’* one of ‘em? You’ll get your revenge soon enough... once we take ‘em all to the *Kiladree*. *Then*, you’ll get your revenge and a nice *bit* of change for your trouble. But they won’t be no *good* for the *Kiladree* if they’re too *banged* up... you know *tha*’.” With a grin, his silver teeth sparkling in the candlelight, continued, “They like to do *that* ‘emselves.”

Stimson stops and seems to be working that out. “Yeah... *all* righ’. Jus’ had to pay back that *Elf* scum for the *Vorla*,” and spat on the bleeding and moaning Thian.

The Black Stranger stands surveying the scene before him. He stretches. “All righ’, ‘nough fun for *now* boys. It’s time. Let’s get em’ *downstairs* where we can get ‘em ready, and prepare em’ for the *journey*... their one-way journey ta be sold for the pleasur’ o’ their new *masters*.” Stimson cackles.

Stimson grabs Thian’s hair and pulls him up, but Thian drops hard. Stimson looks quickly at Tia, Anastasia and Sadie. “Well... wha’ ya all *waitin’* for? Come ‘*ere* an’ get him up or you’ll taste the same!”

They run to Thian and gently support him, crying and talking softly to him. “No *yappin’* you three!” Stimson says and *smacks* Tia hard on the back of her head.

“*This way,*” Gorth says as he walks past them and opens a small door. The girls move Thian toward the door, but just as they reach the threshold, the Black Stranger speaks.

“Stop! Not *her*. *She* stays here.” The Stranger is pointing at Sadie. “She stays *here* for now... that is, if she don’ want nothin’ *horrible* happenin’ to her friends.”

As he finishes his last words, Sadie hesitantly begins to move away from Thian’s side, and is forced into the chair the Black Stranger had occupied. The Black Stranger *flicks* his wand and just like Amanda, Sadie is bound tightly.

“Why *her*, eh?” Stimson asks the Black Stranger. “She’s going to the Kiladree *too*, *ain’t* she?”

“Oh, *indee*’ she is. But she a *young* ‘un, she is. Need to be *untouched* to be valuable. She’ll bring us *more* than all the others put together.”

Stimson cackles loudly rubbing his hands together again. He turns back to Tia and Anastasia who are supporting Thian’s weight, although he is beginning to recover. “*Get* in there... *now!*” and pushes them over the threshold of the small doorway.

Tia and Anastasia see nothing but a long stairway leading down. It is completely dark at the bottom. Tia feels Stimson’s *shove* and half drags, half *lifts* Thian to the stairs. “I can’t *see* anything. Can you at least cast some *light* down there?”

Musache brings Tianna back to consciousness, as she gasps and looks around, completely confused. Pointing his *wand* at her, he motions for her to stand. Pointing his wand at Amanda, he mumbles something Amanda cannot quite hear, and she *immediately* gets to her feet, feeling the bindings she has been *fighting* against vanish. Her eyes are wide and her heart is *pounding* wildly.

Stimson cackles even louder. “*Go* on... *go on...* if you don’ wan’ *more* things to happen to your little *friend* there!”

Behind him, Gorth steps forward and grabbing Amanda and Tianna by each arm, pushes them through the doorway. Tianna, still dizzy, sways a little but is supported by Amanda.

Gorth goes back for Cassandra and pushes her *roughly* through the doorway after the others. She moans loudly, her face *bruised* and mouth still bleeding and lips puffy. “Can’ *wait* to be rid of *this* ‘un! She stinks *fierce*! She tries an pulls her mouth with the *Kiladree*, an’ *they* won’ be as *patient* and understandin’ as *us!*”

Tia and Anastasia have felt their way down the stairs with Thian, when Gorth *slams* the door and locks it. They are thrown into utter and complete darkness.

Cassandra starts to cry as she trips at the top of the stairs, falling against the railing, where she freezes in place.

Amanda, now at the bottom of the stairs, turns to the side and walks a short way, then gently lowers Tianna to the floor, and begins feeling her way back to the stairs. She wants to make her way back up, to see if she can hear what the men are planning, and if they are *hurting* Sadie. In the darkness, she bumps into several boxes, then walks *straight* into the wall on her way to the stairs. Finally finding the stairway, she slowly makes her way up the steps. Suddenly, she bumps into a *startled* Cassandra.

“Ow! Didn’t you *know* I was here! I’m *hurt* and I need help!” Cassandra hisses angrily.

“Of *course* I didn’t know you were still *up* here... it’s completely *dark* in here! I *thought* you were already down,” Amanda says, *not* in the mood for *anything* Cassandra. “Oh... for *heaven’s* sake! *Here*, give me your arm and I’ll help you down.”

Cassandra shoves her arm up and outward, *smacking* Amanda square in the face. “Hey! *Watch* it Cassandra. You just *punched* me in the face! I’ll put my arm around your waist, and

you hold onto me too.” Slowly, each holding onto the other, they make their way down, using the wall and railing as their guide. As soon as there are no more stairs, Amanda helps Cassandra to the side and gently to the floor.

Amanda *squints* as she looks around, hoping her eyes will adjust to the blackness. But, the more she strains her eyes, the *darker* it seems to get. She decides not to attempt the stairs again.

“*Tia... Anastasia... where are you?*” Amanda asks as she blindly walks forward slowly, her arms held out in front of her. She trips over a small wooden box, *almost* losing her balance, when she hears Tia call back.

“*Here... we’re over here. It’s so black in here I can’t see a thing.*”

“Keep talking. I’ll try to follow your voice.”

“Where’s *Thian*?” Tianna asks from nearby. “We haven’t heard him since he came down. I need to get to him - he’s *really* hurt.”

Tianna’s voice startles Amanda. “Tianna, I *think* I’m right beside you.” Amanda feels something touch her leg, making her jump.

“Is that *you*?” Tianna asks with a shaky voice.

“Yeah.” Reaching down blindly, Amanda’s hand finds Tianna’s head. “Take my hand and I’ll help you up. Are you okay?”

Getting to her feet, Tianna says, “Yeah, well, I am *now*, kind of... *you*?”

“I’m alright. *Tia*? Talk to us and we’ll *both* come over to you.”

“Why didn’t you do your... *Wielder* thing?” Tianna asks crossly. “Why didn’t you *do* something to help us? To stop them from *hurting* Thian?”

“I *couldn’t* Tianna!” Amanda says feeling horrible. “I don’t know *how*, remember? I’m *sorry*. I don’t know *why* I can do it sometimes, and *not* others. I just... *can’t*.”

“Well, what did you *expect* her to do anyway?” Cassandra asks loudly with *ill*-disguised bad temper, from somewhere nearby. “It was all *Tianna’s* fault with going into Shadow Alley!”

“If it was *anyone’s* fault, Cassa, it was *yours*!” Anastasia says heatedly. “*Yours! You’re* the one who wanted to come *down* this way! *You’re* the one who just started *walking* off by yourself. *We* had to go after *you*!”

“*Yeah?* Only because *Tianna* wanted to find that *stupid* Bellinora witch! And *why*? Just tell me *why*? This whole *thing* is stupid!” Cassandra yells back at her.

“*You* only came with us because you wanted to find the lost *treasure* Cassa! *Not* because you wanted to help them find her.

“And *thanks* a lot for telling that *maniac* Gorth upstairs, that *I* was the one who *yelled* at them at the pub, when it was *you*! Why’d you *do* that? I *thought* we were *best* friends!”

“Well, what did you *want* me to say? That it was me? He was going to *kill* me!”

“So... *what*? It would have been *better* for him to kill *me*, Cassa? I’ve *always* stuck up for *you* when you say or do things... it’s always been *me* backing *you* up. And now you just *throw* me to a pack of *Handreens*, like I’m *nothing* to you!”

“Stop!” Thian’s weak voice echoes through the room. “Stop! Nothing matters now but trying to think of how we...” his voice wavers, “how we can get *out* of this mess.”

“Oh, *Thian*...” tears are in Tianna’s voice. “I thought they... that you might be... are *you* okay? I’m coming,” Amanda hears Tianna shuffle past her toward Thian’s voice.

“I’ll *live* I guess. I must have *passed* out there for a minute. I’m doing *better* now, really. Is everyone else okay? I need to hear your *voices* so I know that everyone’s here. Cassandra and Anastasia, I already know *you’re* both here....and Tianna. *Tia*?”

“I’m somewhere *next* to you Thian. I’m okay.”

"Amanda... you here?" Thian asks as he works a kink from his neck.

"Yes. I'm coming to you too."

"Sadie? Sadie... are you *here*?" Thian asks urgently.

"They've *still* got her upstairs," Tia says sadly. "The Black Stranger said he wants to keep her *with* them for some reason."

"What are we gonna do? *How* are we going to get out of here and *rescue* Sadie?" Tianna asks desperately.

"Does anyone have *anything* we can use as a weapon?" Thian asks. "The *Stranger* took all our wands. Feel around on the floor, or *whatever* else is down here, and see if you can find anything."

Everyone is quiet as they begin their search. Anastasia is edging around the walls when she bumps into someone. "Will you stop *doing* that!" Cassandra's voice rings out.

"I couldn't *see* you! Aren't you going to help?"

"I'm *hurt*! I can't see anything *anyway*. I just need to..."

The door opens at the top of the stairs, flooding the room with dim light. The sudden introduction of light blinds everyone as they all put their arms up, shielding their eyes.

They hear the Black Stranger's voice. "Your *discomfort* won't be for long. But I must ask you to *not* do anythin', for which you'll be *sorry*, or for which..." he drags Sadie next to him tightening his grip on her neck. Sadie *cries* out in pain, grabbing at his hand.

"Sadie!" Tianna screams.

"...she'll be *sorry*. Have I made myself... *clear*?"

No one speaks. The Stranger tightens his grip on Sadie's neck again, *pinching* her skin hard, and making her scream louder.

"Yes! *Yes*! We understand! Please... *please* don't hurt her... she's just an *innocent* little girl!" Tianna begs.

The Black Stranger laughs. "Yes... thas' wha' I'm *countin'* on. An *untouched*, unspoiled little *girl*!" He ruffles Sadie's hair. "Jus' a *sweet* chil'. So we *have* an understandin' then? Good."

The blackness returns as he slams the door. They all hear the lock turn and the bolt snapping into place.

"*Forget* him. Keep *looking*," Thian says gruffly.

They have just resumed their search when something *heavy* crashes against the door at the head of the stairs, startling everyone.

"Do you *have* to make all that noise?" Cassandra accuses the room.

"No one down *here* made that noise. That was *upstairs*," Amanda says as new fear envelops her. "I don't know for *sure* what they have planned for us, but I've got some ideas, and *none* of them are pleasant. We better keep looking for *anything* we can use, once they come for us."

A huge boom *shakes* the room, as everyone lets out a scream of surprise. A large stack of boxes topples over, striking *Tia* and Tianna. There is a short pause, then another loud *crash* and the walls begin to shake.

"What's *happening*?" Cassandra screams.

The room becomes quiet. They all wait for the shaking to resume but when it does not, they quickly resume the search, fearing the men will *come* for them at any moment, and that something has happened to Sadie.

Suddenly, the walls *shake* so violently that Amanda feels as though the entire *building* is being torn from its foundation. Anastasia *screams* and falls against a nearby wall, splitting her lip open. Amanda is *thrown* against Thian and Tianna, knocking them to the ground. The basement

walls begin to *crumble*, as part of the *ceiling* caves in, crashing down on Tia who becomes *trapped* by the heavy debris. They all begin choking on the dust and debris-filled room.

"It must be an *earthquake*!" Amanda screams. "*Hold on!*"

The walls shudder as they are *torn* apart. More of the ceiling falls in on them as everyone covers their heads with their arms.

It is complete *bedlam* and chaos. The sounds are a *terrifying* mixture of crashing, rending, *ripping*, bursting and *shattering*. It becomes *so* loud, they all hold their ears tightly feeling as though their *heads* will explode.

Just as Amanda feels this will surely be their deaths, the shaking *abruptly* stops. At first, Amanda is not sure whether everything has really stopped, or if she may have *died*. She drops her hands from her ears and feels the pain from her head start. "Can you *feel* pain if you're dead?" she wonders.

When Tia moans, Amanda knows for sure that she is *not* dead. As Amanda opens her mouth to speak, she begins coughing violently as she inhales dust and crushed rock from the demolished ceiling and walls.

The door above them *bursts* open. They suddenly find themselves in the grip of a *torrential* and violent windstorm. Amanda thinks crazily, "First an earthquake, now a *tornado*?" as she tries to hold onto a heavy box next to her, so she will not be blown away.

The wind quickly dies as she hears a familiar voice. "I hope I did not do *too* much damage down there. Here, let me help," and the Wind Rider blows downstairs.

Even with light flooding in from above, the heavy dust and dirt in the air makes it hard to see the Wind Rider, but his *presence* can clearly be felt. In a moment, *hundreds* of pounds of ceiling and debris are easily lifted up and moved to the side, freeing Tia.

"I will move each of you upstairs. It is alright. You are all *safe*. I will take you first Miss."

Tia groans loudly as the Wind Rider lifts her gently and takes her upstairs, placing her carefully on the floor.

He makes the trip five more times. When he brings Tianna up and places her in a chair, she grips her side and looks around *frantically* for Sadie. Sadie who has been kneeling beside Tia, runs to her and *hugs* her tightly. They hug and cry and laugh nervously, making sure each is okay.

His last trip is Amanda, who he places next to Thian.

Their eyes are still sensitive to the brighter candle light, but adjust quickly. Wind Rider brings water for them all to drink. He finds a large bowl and fills it with more water, then washes and tends to their wounds. He pays *close* attention to Thian, and after using some special herbs he pulled from a pouch on his belt, along with setting several *healing* and anti-pain spells over him, Thian soon feels strong enough to sit up. Thian continues to feel his strength quickly returning, as he looks around at the *completely* demolished room.

The Wind Rider sits on the floor in the devastated building, patiently waiting for their strength to return from the applied Wizitch.

Amanda is the first to speak. "How... *how* did you know..." and begins to cough.

"The *cat*. She *sees* and knows *much* and told me. She had a run-in with an old *nemesis*, and while chasing *him*, saw *you* all. She knew that this was *not* going to end well... *Shadow Alley* and all... where only the *Darker* of souls dare to enter.

"And, she told me... you had *drawn* your wands. Now, didn't I *tell* you that you do *not* draw your wands in *this* place, unless you are ready to *lose* your life?"

"That was *my* fault," Thian says softly. "I'm sorry, but those cats..." his head jerks up with dawning comprehension, "So... *one* of those cats was... *your* cat then? The one who *told* you about us?"

"Well, what *other* cats would I mean? But," he sighs, "actually, she's not *my* cat. Wish she *were* though. *Smarter* than me a good deal of the time too. But no, she is *bound* to a dear friend.

"When she told me where you were... with *wands* drawn... she knew there would be *more* trouble than you all could handle on your own. And, of course, as *usual*, she was correct."

"But how did you know where we *were*? With those *horrible* men..." Amanda's voice trails off.

"*That* was not difficult. I wanted to make sure Gorth Capp, Stimson and Musache, his *Associates*, were still where I sent them... to the *Vorla*. I made a quick trip to see them, and the *Vorla* told me they had *escaped* for a second time. Then, I knew.

"So, putting everything together, I knew they would come to their place of... *business* as they call it. As you can see, when I paid them a *friendly* visit, we had... a little *chat*."

They all look around the decimated building and understand the *chat*... had gone badly. "But, where *are* they?" Amanda asks nervously looking around for them.

The Wind Rider raises his hands slightly. "*Not* my decision. The *Vorla* wanted them back, plus their *silver* toothed friend. And this time, they *won't* be leaving. *Ever*. So you have no need to worry about them any longer.

"*Shadow Alley* is *no* place for ones such as yourselves. I'll take you back to the village... I don't know *why* you're here, but you don't *belong* here. There are others *gathering* in the darkness outside. We need to leave, *now*," and turning around, opens the large black bag the Black Stranger had dropped their wands in, and returns all their wands.

"No... we *can't* go yet," Sadie says, speaking for the first time. "We came *all* this way and went through *all* this, and we *still* haven't found her yet. We *have* to find her... for Amanda. I don't want to come back here *tomorrow* to look for her."

The Wind Rider, looking puzzled, looks to Amanda. "Find her? *Who*?"

Amanda hesitates. "Uh, well, we're looking for someone named *Bellinora*. She's *supposed* to be a really *powerful* witch, who lives in a cave in some *mountain* near here, or something... we think."

"*Bellinora*? Why in *all* the realms do you want to find *her*?"

"Our reasons are our own. Do you *know* her?" Amanda asks hopefully. "There's something I... I've got to *ask* her. It's *really* important. Please... if you *know* her, or know where we can *find* her, please tell me." Amanda asks quickly, her heart suddenly racing.

He looks at her, smiles, then nods slowly. "Yes, of *course* I know *Bellinora*. *She's* the dear friend I spoke about. And you are correct, she *is* a very power witch. She is also a *great* herbal healer. *Bellinora* is *known* for her potions, and writes and casts *spells* of all kinds and such.

"If you would have *told* me you sought her when we first met, I would have directed you to her *long* ago. Are you all feeling fit enough to walk?"

They all agree they are. Wind Rider stands. "Come..." and walks outside.

Amanda and the others follow, making their way around the heavy rubble.

Once outside, Amanda and the others look nervously around the pathway. Amanda notices *shining* eyes peering at them from the darkness between the buildings. The others see them too.

"Not to worry. They *know* better than to try anything while *I* am with you, at least for *now*. Come. I will take you back to the village. It's alright. No need to be afraid."

“A little late for *that* now,” Amanda thinks as she and the others stick closely grouped behind the Wind Rider.

They’re all feeling much better as they pass out of the tree-lined tunnel and back into the open. In no time they make their way back to the village buildings, and back into the lighted areas.

There are many people milling around the shops, who look at them curiously, *especially* being led by the Wind Rider, who *everyone* seems to know, but who *obviously* wish to keep their distance from.

As they round the last building and enter the open square, the Wind Rider turns and faces the far end of the village, where there is a road leading toward the large mountain in the distance.

“You *see* that dirt road there? Fly along it until you reach the “Y” at the base of the mountain. Fly *straight* up the mountain, *directly* between the “Y.” You will find her cave a *good* way up, somewhat *recessed* into the mountain itself. *Very* easy to find.

“Once you get there, fly in, dismount, and follow the path between the huge rock structures. Once you find the sign with the *green* arrow, just follow the path it indicates back to her place.”

Amanda looks at the road and sees the dim outline of the mountain in the distance. She turns to the Wind Rider. He smiles down at her and she smiles back, “Thank you. Looks like you saved us *again*. We owe you so much,” and is so overcome with emotion, that she falls into his arms hugging him tightly.

Startled, he smiles as he pats her back and waits until she is ready to let him go.

As Amanda finally pulls away from him, he says gently, “Then *here* is my price. When you see Bellinora, please tell her that *Melteme* sends her his regards, and hopes for another of her *fabulous* stews.”

Everyone laughs, and after they have each thanked him, they walk back along the boardwalk to the end, turn left, and make their way into the alley, heading for the broom closet.

As Amanda reaches the corner of the building, she looks back along the square, seeing the Wind Rider raise his arm to her in farewell. He spins quickly in a circle, turning into a black *vapor*, and disappears in a *swirl* of rising black mist.

Thian, feeling much better, retrieves all their brooms, then says softly, “I don’t know about all of *you*, but I’ve *had* it. I say we go back to the cabin, take a *hot* bath and get some sleep. We can look for Bellinora in the morning, now that we *think* we know where to find her. I just want to get the *heck* away from here for now.”

No one objects. They all mount and kick off, heading for the cabin.

Finally there, intense fatigue overwhelms them all, as they struggle to clean up, and spend a *very* restless night, causing them to sleep late into the following morning.

## Finding Bellinora

[To TOC](#)



In the morning after breakfast, Sadie does her thing to make them all look *dirty* and grungy, being somewhat kinder to Cassandra this time, not knowing *who* they may meet along their journey to the mountain.

Thian and Tianna pack up and secure the cabin, then Thian puts the can into his deep pants pocket, along with a can of Instant Outhouse, and a can of Instant Toilet Paper. He has each of the others do the same. The pants they are wearing have *many* pockets down each leg - one *deep* one on each side near the top, plus several others.

When everyone has their traveler's packs on and adjusted, they head off toward the village. Once they spot it, they fly around the outer edge, then along the old dirt road that leads out of the village, and supposedly, will lead them to a "Y" in the road. They then fly up the mountain to the cave where Bellinora is said to live, somewhere high up within the nearby mountain, which they still cannot believe is within *this* mountain.

Looking around as they fly, their spirits rise as the road winds its way once again into the lush forest away from the village. The pine-like trees are *huge* and the smell, mixed with the wildflowers, is *wonderful*. They laugh at all the little animals that scamper across the road, or peek out from behind a tree, log or boulder.

After a time, Amanda *cries* out when a small, *strange* looking creature leaps *high* from the bushes near the side of the road, with a *high*-pitched cry of its own. Amanda is *so* startled, she almost *falls* off her broom.

The little critter *scampers* to the middle of the road, and then begins *leaping* into the air about three to four feet, *over* and over again. Suddenly, it runs around frantically in circles, then once again, leaps *repeatedly*, spinning wildly in the air as it does so. It is *constantly* making a kind of stuttering *snork*-like sound.

Everyone comes to a hover as they watch the strange animal leap, spin in circles and stutter "sn... sno... snor... *sork*," over and over.

Amanda laughs as the sound reminds her of the cartoon character *Porky Pig*. The animal is about the size of a large *house* cat on earth, but with *short* gray fur and stubby short *springy* legs. Its tail is *longer* than its body, which is very thin and furless. It has *tall* pointed ears and a very long pointed face, with a nose sticking out *six* inches that *twitches* and waves around in all directions. The nose reminds Amanda of the trunk on an *elephant*... but in miniature.

After about twenty seconds, the little creature shoots across the road, leaps *spinning* high into the air, and disappears into the tall grass and bushes. All that can be heard is a fading “sn... sno... snor... *sork*” repeated over and over.

“What the *heck* was *that*?” Amanda asks, laughing, still clutching at her chest. “*Scared* me half to *death*!”

“*That* was a Stuttering *Snorkrat* Amanda,” Anastasia laughs along with everyone else.

“Yeah... that’s where the phrase, ‘*Stuttering Snorkrat!*’ comes from,” Cassandra says smiling. “You know, like when you’re *startled* or surprised, and you say, ‘*Stuttering Snorkrat!*’ They only do that when they’re *startled*. *Usually* scares their predators away too.”

They all laugh and head off along the road once again, talking about where all the *strange* phrases everyone uses comes from, as they all try their *best* to come up with as many as they can. Some Amanda brings up are: holy smokes; holy cow; holy moly; Jesus; Jesus Christ; oh god; bless you; for heaven’s sake; for the love of god; for the love of Christ and darn it.

There are many from the others, including: two moons; two moons over the mountain; by the moons; stuttering snorkrat; by the lord and lady; by the oak and ash; and the list goes on till they just cannot laugh any more, and fly on in silence for a while.

“I sure hope this *is* the Bellinora we’re looking for,” Tia says laughing as she points to what looks like a kind of *rabbit* scurrying across the road. “I mean... Wind Rider *did* say she lives in a cave in the mountains. And he said she *is* a very powerful witch who makes potions, writes and casts spells and stuff, and is a great *herbal* healer too! So, she *sounds* like the Bellinora we’re looking for, but *who* knows.”

“Yeah, I hope it’s her too,” Amanda says, becoming serious, reaching up and feeling the necklace beneath her robe. “I’d *really* like to find out how to get...” then glancing at Anastasia and Cassandra who are looking intently at her, “uh, what we *came* for, you know.”

“But you’ve never told us *what* you came here *for*,” Cassandra says suspiciously. “Don’t you think you can tell us *now*? After *everything* we’ve been through together? I mean, *come* on, we could have *died* being with you, you *know*!”

“No!” Tianna snaps quickly. “Like we said back in your village... you can come *with* us to help us *find* Bellinora, *then* we part ways. You go *your* way... we go *ours*. *That* was the deal, and if this *is* the Bellinora we’re looking for... that’s as *far* as *you* go with us.”

Cassandra purses her lips as her eyes narrow, but does not say anything more.

The road they have been following, suddenly branches off in a “Y” to either side of a huge jetting section of rock, at the mountains base. They all come to a hover.

Thian looks straight up the mountain between the forks of the “Y.” After a moment’s thought he says, “Well, Wind Rider said that when we come to the fork in the road, to fly *straight* up the mountain between the fork. *Someplace* up there, we should find the *large* opening to her cave.”

“Yeah,” Anastasia says looking up the mountain too. “He said to fly into the cave, *dismount*, then follow the path between the *huge* rock structures...”

“Then follow the sign we’re supposed to find, that has a *green* arrow on it,” Amanda says looking at Tianna. “And it’s *supposed* to lead us back to her, well... her *place* I guess.”

“Well, let’s see what we can find okay?” Thian says nervously. “But... I don’t know about *you*... but from *this* point on, I’m keeping *my* wand at the ready. After what we’ve been through, I don’t trust *anybody* in that village. And even though that guy Wind Rider may have saved us.... even *he* could be sending us into another *trap* you know - to *sell* us off for whoever *he* works for or something.”

“I’m with *you*!” Cassandra says pulling her wand. “This *adventure* hasn’t turned out to be as much *fun* as I thought it would be.”

“You’re free to leave *now* if you want,” Tianna says hopefully.

“You’d *like* that wouldn’t you?” Cassandra says with a snarl. “Nice *try*, but I’m *staying* till we find the *fabled* Bellinora. When I go home, I want to be able to tell *everyone* that I not only got *into* Witch Mountain, but that I actually *met* the great witch herself... in *person*!”

“I really don’t believe Wind Rider *is* one of the bad guys,” Amanda says softly. “But, I guess he *could* be. I mean, we really don’t know *what* we’ll find... or *who* might be waiting for us up there.”

“Well, we won’t find her sitting here,” Thian says as he flies off looking up the mountain. “Let’s go, and *keep* your eyes open.”

Everyone has their wand out as they head off after Thian, looking around nervously, expecting to be *ambushed* at any moment.

They slowly fly up the mountain, weaving between the tall pine-like trees in a horizontal line. By keeping about twenty feet between themselves, they figure they have a better chance of spotting the cave entrance and not missing it, not knowing how *large* the cave entrance will really be.

They need not have bothered though, for once they climbed about two thousand feet, they see an *indentation* in the mountain, bowing back slightly into the mountainside where the trees quickly thin out. The opening of a *large* cave becomes clearly visible a distance back from a huge overhang of rock.

“Well, it looks like we *found* it okay,” Anastasia says as they all drift together, stopping in a hover, about a hundred feet in front of the opening.

“Looks like it has a light blue *glow* inside, so I guess we won’t need to ignite our wands,” Tia says slowly moving forward, following Thian and Tianna further in. “But, I’m *keeping* my wand out anyway. I don’t like the *looks* of this. Nice place for an *ambush*.”

“Yeah, who knows what we’ll *really* find in there,” Cassandra says, flying slowly behind Amanda and Anastasia.

They fly into the large cave which looks to narrow as it continues further in. Reaching a narrowing section, Thian and Tianna dismount first, then wait for the others to join them.

Looking around the inside, Amanda sees it is a nice sized cave, with *wonderful* rock formations. Tilting her head slightly, she hears *dripping* water coming from someplace within the darkness of the huge gaps, between some of the giant columns of rocks. The floor is *so* worn, it has become somewhat shiny.

“Well, so *far* so good,” Tianna says in a whisper. Then pointing says, “That’s *obviously* a path leading further into the cave, so, let’s follow that. But *keep* ready.”

“Listen,” Thian says in a low whisper, the others having to lean in to hear him. “Sadie, Tianna, *you* two take point. Tianna, *you* scan front and slightly to the sides. *Sadie*, if you can, do your *thing* and see if you can spot anybody, or, *anything*, hiding behind those huge rock structures. Try left, then *right*, then repeat.

“Tia, Amanda, *you* two keep your eyes *glued* to the left, and I want you walking at an *angle*... Tia, you watch from slightly *forward* and to the left, back to about where your left shoulder will be. Amanda, *you* turn more to the *rear* walking at an angle. You’ll scan from about where Tia will be ending *her* scan, and then scan back to about where *I’ll* be, then repeat.

“Anastasia, Cassandra, watch the *right*... same thing, Anastasia in *front* of Cassandra. *I’ll* watch our backs. If any of you see *anything*, call out. *Got* it?”

They all nod. Thian nods back and says, “Okay then, everyone keep sharp. Tianna, Sadie... *move* out.”

Tianna nods to Sadie, who looks scared to death, as do the others. Tianna takes point with Sadie nervously looking first to one side, then the other. After about fifteen feet, Thian says, “Okay, *move* out.” Tia and Amanda turn somewhat sideways and begin to move slowly along the path, watching for *anything* within the pitch dark spaces between the huge rock formations, looking for anything that may *jump* out from behind the many boulders on the left side of the path. Anastasia and Cassandra do the same, but on the *right* side. After the four of them have moved off about fifteen feet, Thian begins walking *backward*, waving his wand from side to side as he scans behind them.

After following the winding path for about five minutes, Tianna and Sadie round a corner and enter a *large* area of the cavern, where they spot an old *wooden* sign some distance away. Tianna halts Sadie, turns and catches Tia and Anastasia’s eyes, who halt Amanda and Cassandra. Amanda waits for Thian to walk up to them. Thian had already heard them all stop, but keeps walking backward, watching their backs, till he reaches them.

When the others round the corner, they are all facing the old wood sign. They look around the large cavern nervously, listening for any sounds of movement. This *slick* cavern has more of the wonderful, huge *glistening* rock formations.

“Well, looks like this *might* be the right place after all,” Amanda says looking at the wooden sign which has a large *green* arrow pointing to one of the pathways within the cavern. “Let’s see what the sign says okay?”

They all walk cautiously to the old sign.

This is what the writing looks like:

ᠠᠨᠠᠶᠠᠰᠢᠰᠢᠶ᠋ᠠᠨ

ᠴᠠᠰᠠᠩᠳᠠᠷᠠ

ᠲᠢᠨᠠᠨᠠ

“The writings in that old *witches* Theban,” Amanda says looking intently at it. As she concentrates on what the writing means, the letters change and morph into her native English. “It says, ‘**Bellinora’s Wizitch wonders.**’” Then turning to face the others who are also intently concentrating on the translation, Amanda smiles, “Oh my *God*... I think we’ve really *found* her! I think we’ve really *found* Bellinora!”

The others are excited too, but Tianna says, “Yeah, well *maybe*. But there could be *hundreds* of witches named Bellinora, *couldn’t* there?”

“Sure,” Amanda says with a laugh, “but *how* many do you think live *high* up in a cave, just *outside* Darkwoods Village, where the great witch we’re looking for is *rumored* to be? This

location fits what the *Journal* says too, and everything Anastasia told us about what she's read. Honestly, I think this *is* the place. Come on, let's follow the arrow and see what we find."

They all agree, and since the path is narrow as it makes its way between two huge columns of rock, they are forced to walk in single file. Tianna is in the lead, but Thian is right behind her, followed by the others. *Cassandra* finds herself in the rear, and is *constantly* looking behind her nervously, waiting for something to *jump* out at her.

It is not long before they step out from between some *gigantic* mounds of rocks that reach *hundreds* of feet overhead, and into a clearing. There is another, *smaller* opening to a cave, about twenty-five feet in front of them, emitting a *soft* orangish-yellow glow.

"*Lantern* light by the looks of it," Thian says in a whisper.

Thian no sooner finishes, when a *huge*, deformed *shadow* appears on the right inside wall of the glowing cave. It appears to be a *hideous* creature walking on four legs, and the shadow becomes *almost* as large as the tunnel itself.

Its form *ripples* over the large stones and cracks within the jagged tunnel wall. The kids crouch, pointing their *wands* at the opening, expecting the *giant* creature to *charge* them the moment it spots them.

In a second, Amanda and the others are surprised to see a small black *cat*, walking calmly around the curved opening, and stands in the center of the pathway, *directly* under the entrance.

The kids exhale as one, breaking into nervous laughs, as they realize the light from within the tunnel had *magnified* and distorted the cat's shadow as it passed a *floor* lantern.

Sadie giggles, points to the cat saying, "*Krispit!*"

"What?" Amanda asks. "You mean... the *cat*?"

"What's a *cat*?" Sadie asks looking confused. "You all kept *calling* those two krispits we saw before *cats* too. Where I come from, we call them a *krispit*."

"Actually, they're known by *hundreds* of names on different realms," Tia says smiling at the small cat. "And even in different *areas* on the same realm. *We* call them cats too, where we come from."

"So do *we*," Anastasia says with a laugh. "Look how *cute* it is."

The cat is sitting up, watching them intently, with its tail curled around it. After several more moments, the cat gets up, turns around and begins doing a *strange* rocking motion, forward and back, while looking over its shoulder at them.

"I... I *think* it wants us to *follow* it," Anastasia says looking at the cat still rocking forward and back, staring at them.

"I think you're *right*!" Amanda says walking forward with Tianna and Sadie right behind her. The others follow closely behind, as the cat turns away and begins walking around the corner and into the tunnel.

Amanda steps through the opening, into the softly lit short tunnel. After about twenty-five feet, the tunnel ends into a *wonderful* cavern, *filled* with wooden shelves, every inch *jammed* with small jars, filled with powders, *liquids* and other strange items. One wall is filled with *hundreds* and hundreds of drawers, which rises at *least* a hundred and ten feet. Everyone's mouths are open as they look around at all the *strange* and wonderful things. Amanda decides this must be a *showroom* of some kind.

Footsteps sound, coming *closer* from the far side of this cavern, from yet *another* tunnel. A woman's voice reaches them.

"It certainly *took* you kids long enough to get here. Jasmine tells me she has been *watching* you for over an hour - *ever* since you left the village."

Amanda's eyes widen as a *breathtaking* woman with *beautiful* long black braided hair, draped over her right shoulder, comes around the corner and casually leans against the tunnel wall. She is wearing a *spectacular* robe of *brilliant* royal blue velvet, with satin inserts. Fine *silver* and gold threads run through the fabric, depicting what appears to be, various *solar* systems. As Amanda looks at the robe, she realizes the planets are actually *moving* in their respective orbits around golden suns. The woman looks altogether *otherworldly*.

She smiles at them with *striking* green eyes, as she steps forward and to the side of the entrance, moving her eyes over each of the kids in turn. Her cat, jumps up on a tall pedestal beside her, and purrs *loudly* as the woman strokes its head with her long slender fingers.

"Welcome to Bellinora's Wizitch Wonders. I am Bellinora, and this is *Jasmine* my familiar. Please, put your *wands* away, you will not need them here.

"We have never *had* visitors from *outside* Witch Mountain before. I have *no* idea how you found the entrance at *portal* nine, nor, *how* you managed to take the *right* roads, once you left the ledge, and *not* end up in the many *traps* that have been set over the ages. And as to how ones as *young* as yourselves, managed to *avoid* the ancient traps along the roads, is a *puzzle*. But when you entered *Darkwoods Village* the first time, and were unusually... *clean*, according to Jasmine, *that* peaked my interest greatly.

"Jasmine tells me, you all had *quite* an exciting time in the village yesterday. And met a *friend* of mine, who Jasmine tells me, came to your aid... *twice*. I would like to hear all about that. But first, I am *most* curious to hear what brings the *seven* of you young folks, in search of *me*."

Everyone turns as one to look at Amanda. Amanda closes her mouth, swallows and takes a couple hesitant steps forward. "Well, *actually*, we're looking for someone *named* Bellinora, but now that I see you, I don't *really* think you're the one we're looking for."

"Oh? And why is *that*?" Bellinora asks, looking more intently at Amanda. Actually, it appears as though she is *studying* Amanda closely.

"Well, the Bellinora *we're* looking for, is supposed to be, well, really *old*. And, obviously, you're *not*."

"Why *thank* you... Miss..." the woman tilts her head forward still looking intently at Amanda.

"Oh, *sorry*, my name's *Amanda*."

The moment Amanda says her name, the woman's eyes fly wide. She takes a couple quick steps toward Amanda, *startling* not only Amanda, but everyone else.

"Amanda?" the woman asks in a low whisper, stepping up and reaching out with a trembling hand to her, before *snatching* it back. "No... it *cannot* be... she is..." The woman stands straight and shakes her head slowly, staring at Amanda *so* intensely, that Amanda turns red from embarrassment, although she has *no* idea why.

Turning, Amanda says, "Um, these are my friends - Tianna, Tia, *Sadie*, Anastasia, Cassandra and *Thian*."

The woman's eyes never leave Amanda's face, as Amanda introduces the others. But when Amanda says *Thian*'s name, the woman's eyes *snap* to him. After a short pause, her eyes go *wide* again as she inhales sharply, and looks him up and down slowly.

Thian looks at the others quickly, then looks down the front of his body, thinking something must be *crawling* on him, or he has not *dressed* properly.

The woman slowly moves to Thian and stands before him. Her eyes are still wide as they study Thian's *very* dirty face, as a clump of dirt falls to the floor from his hair. After a few

heartbeats, Thian smiles and says, “Uh, *hi*. Sorry we’re so dirty. I guess we *should* have cleaned up some before coming to see you.”

The woman shakes her head slowly as in disbelief, then takes a couple steps back, the color having *clearly* drained from her face. “By the *moons* of Elentar... can it *possibly* be?” she says in a whisper so low Amanda barely hears her.

Bellinora steps to Tia and Tianna, and looks them over slowly for a moment, then turns to look to Amanda and says again, in a whisper so low Amanda has to strain to hear, “And... *together*? No, it *cannot* be. It is but the *demons* of my past, come to torment me.”

The kids are feeling *very* uncomfortable, and all look it. *Sadie* has moved back behind Tianna, and is peeking out from around her legs.

The woman, looking at the others, sees the frightened expressions on all their faces. She quickly collects herself, smiles and says calmly, “I am *sorry*. *Some* of you remind me of those I miss *very* much. *Forgive* me. Tell me, *why* are you looking for someone named Bellinora?”

Licking her lips, Amanda says, “Well, we, or actually *I*... was sent here to *speak* with you... uh, *her*.”

“Sent here dear? By *whom*? For what *purpose*?”

Amanda stands there for a moment, not knowing whether she should say anything or not. But somehow, even though she *is* afraid and does not *know* this woman, she *likes* her, and for some reason, *trusts* her too, though she has no idea why she feels this way.

Struggling with her feelings, she decides to be cautious. This *is* a witch after all, and she *might* have put a spell on them, when they first came into the cave, *making* them like and trust her.

“Before I tell you who sent us and why, I’d like to know if you *recognize* something. Tianna, may I *have* it please?”

Tianna looks at Amanda with an expression of confusion for a moment, until Amanda reaches up and touches her robe where her necklace lay hidden.

“Oh! *Yeah*. Sorry, I *forgot*. Sure...” Tianna reaches into the top of her robe, and takes off her necklace. Amanda walks over as Tianna slips something from the necklace chain, then places it in Amanda’s hand, where she closes her fingers *tightly* around it. Tianna and Amanda lock eyes for a moment, then Tianna nods. Amanda turns and walks to where the woman is standing with a curious expression.

Holding out her hand, she opens it asking, “Do you *recognize* this?”

Amanda no sooner opens her hand, when the woman lets out a *cry*, taking several *staggering* steps backward, placing her right hand over her mouth. Her eyes are *wide*, as the color once again leaves her face.

The cat, *Jasmine*, leaps off the pedestal and *scrambles* quickly into the tunnel where the woman had come from. The cat runs *so* fast around the corner, it *flips* off its feet, landing on its side, where it quickly slides and *slams* into the cavern wall with a cry. It springs to its feet and *tears* down the tunnel, tail sticking *straight* out behind it, as it disappears around a corner.

The kids, *very* scared, take several steps back away from the stunned woman, who is *still* staring at the odd ring resting in Amanda’s outstretched and *trembling* hand.

“Where... *how* did you get that?” Bellinora asks, reaching for, and taking the ring in her *own* shaking hand.

“From... *friends*, actually. You *recognize* it then? Is it... *yours*?” Amanda asks with a shaky voice.

“Mine?” Bellinora says in a low whisper, as though she were *thousands* of miles away in thought. “No. No, it *belongs* to...”

Jasmine comes *scurrying* around the corner of the tunnel, with a rolled up parchment *clenched* between her teeth. Jumping onto the pedestal, Bellinora quickly walks to her, takes the parchment and unrolls it.

Looking over the script for a brief moment, Bellinora takes the ring in the tips of her fingers, and *slowly* lowers it toward a raised area on the old parchment.

Amanda watches in wonder, as the ring *jumps* out of Bellinora’s fingers, and seems to *stick* to the parchment. The ring *immediately* begins to glow a *brilliant* blue. Bellinora, giving a short *gasp*, takes the ring and parchment in her left hand, raises her right hand and holds it over them.

*Without* a wand, *or* spoken word from Bellinora, the parchment *rises* into the air and away from her and the others. It rises eight to ten feet, hovers for a moment, then *bursts* into blue flames, the ring pulling loose, as it slowly *rotates* above the flaming parchment.

The kids gasp and step away as the parchment *bursts* apart into *hundreds* of glowing pieces. The glowing pieces quickly form a *complete* fiery sphere around the *pulsating* ring.

“Great *Mother* of Creation... this *is* the real ring. It belongs to...” Bellinora spins around, looking *intently* at Amanda, then to Thian who is standing next to her, and finally to the others.

After several very *tense* moments, Bellinora fixes her stare on *Sadie*, causing Amanda to look at Sadie too.

Bellinora waves her right hand and the parchment *reforms* into one solid piece. The flames *vanish* and the ring slowly floats to Bellinora’s trembling outstretched right hand. The ring stops glowing as soon as it touches her palm. She closes her hand over the ring, as the *unburned* parchment rolls itself up as it descends to Bellinora, coming to rest in her left hand.

Bellinora takes a *deep* steadying breath, lets it out slowly, then says calmly, “Please, follow me. It seems we have *much* to discuss. Josh and *Sam* would not have sent you here, *unless*...” she is silent for a moment, then says, “Unless there is *quite* a story to be told.”

## The Face In The Vapor

[To TOC](#)

They nervously follow Bellinora through the softly lit tunnel, with Jasmine leading the way. They soon come to a wooden door set into the solid rock of the cave. Bellinora waves her hand and the door swings out. Jasmine dashes into a large, warmly lit room, and jumps up onto a low padded pedestal, next to a *wonderfully* carved wooden chair. A large roaring fireplace blazes within one wall, its warmth *inviting* on this cool morning. There are many shelves of ancient looking books rising thirty feet, with *hundreds* of bottles and jars on other shelves, filled with strange and unusual items.

Amanda stops as she looks down at the very beautiful, *huge* round rug in the middle of the room. It shows a close-up of some wonderful *trees* on a hill. She gives a short *gasp* as she realizes she is looking at *tree* houses high within the branches, with numerous people inside. Looking closer, she notices that the people are dressed in colorful robes and gowns. Some are walking up *spectacular* circular stairways, leading to the upper floors within the trees. Many seem to be *dancing* high in the trees on the many platforms.

But what *really* strikes Amanda, is in the center. There she sees a tree sticking up *far* higher than any of the others. She sees the tree house spaces are closed in, with *wonderful* windows everywhere. Some of the windows have *colorful* closed window drapes, while others are open. The limbs, *branches* and leaves of the tree look to be *gold* and silver.

Amanda whispers softly to herself, "I've *seen* this before... in the *city* with the..."

With a wave of Bellinora's hand, all the *dirt*, dust, twigs, and *other* things covering the kids, vanish. They are *completely* clean, as though they had just taken a *long* bath - they even *smell* good.

"Wow! I've *got* to learn that one!" Thian says with a laugh.

Bellinora smiles, waves her hand and a large *fluffy* couch appears to the left and in front of her chair, about eight feet away, making Amanda jump. It is *easily* large enough for four people to be seated comfortably. A small table appears in front of the couch. With another wave of her hand, a *single* fluffy chair appears *directly* in front of her chair, with an end table to its right. Again she waves her hand and *another* fluffy couch appears to the right and in front of her chair, with another small table in front of it. The kids gasp as the couches and chair suddenly *appear* out of nowhere.

"Please, take off your traveler's packs and store them, along with your broom in the hall closet," pointing to another large tunnel where a door can be seen *opening* all by itself, a few feet inside. The kids walk to the closet and store their things, looking at one another nervously.

As they return to the room, Bellinora smiles warmly and motioning to the couches and chair says, "*Please*, take a seat and get comfortable. Amanda, since *you* were the one sent here, would you be kind enough to take the *chair* please?"

Amanda, feeling somewhat apprehensive, takes her seat. Thian, Tianna and Tia take one couch, while Sadie, Anastasia and Cassandra take the other.

Looking at all the nervous faces on the kids, Bellinora smiles saying, "Please, *relax*, I am not going to hurt you. If Josh and *Samantha* sent you here, it would be for my *help*, and yes, I *am* the Bellinora you seek.

"You must be *hungry* and thirsty after your flight." She makes a *sweeping* motion with her arm, and *sandwiches* on plates, along with tall *cool* bubbling drinks with *ice-cream*, appear on the tables in front of everyone, along with a stack of lapkins.

Amanda looks at the plates whispering to herself, "I wonder if she has *house-elves*..?" Smiling, she looks back at Bellinora.

Bellinora says, "*Please*... help yourself, and please do not *hesitate* to ask for more. You may have as *much* as you like."

The kids' eyes go wide and everyone smiles at one another. Thian's stomach lets out a loud *growl*, which breaks the tension as everyone laughs.

"Well, it seems *you* may be hungrier than I *thought*!" Bellinora says with a laugh. She waves her hand and *Thian's* sandwich *doubles* in size. The others *roar* with laughter, as Thian rubs his hands together with a *huge* grin.

"I hope you can all *eat* while we talk. I am most *anxious* to hear why Josh and Sam have sent you here. It must be of *great* importance, and of some *urgency*, not to have brought you here themselves. And, *perhaps*, a great need for *secrecy*, not to have sent me *any* message prior to your arrival."

Amanda has just taken a big bite of her sandwich. Swallowing hard, she turns to look to Thian, Tia and Tianna. Looking back at Bellinora, Amanda dabs her mouth then says, "Well, yeah, it's really *important* for sure. And, it's pretty *urgent* - for *me* anyway."

"I see," Bellinora says as Jasmine mews. "Oh, *sorry* Jasmine, of *course*!" Bellinora waves her hand and the end of the pedestal Jasmine is perched on, extends some and *flares* out in an arc. A bowl *filled* with some kind of meat appears, along with a bowl of white liquid. "Is that alright?" Bellinora asks with a smile. Jasmine mews *twice* and begins to eat.

Everyone laughs and begins eating as well.

"I *love* your Familiar," Tia says smiling at Jasmine.

"Why do you call Jasmine... a *Familiar*?" Amanda asks confused, as she takes a sip through her straw, of what to her delight, tastes like a *root* beer float.

Bellinora looks at Amanda with an *intense* questioning expression, saying softly, "Interesting."

She then looks to Jasmine who is *also* staring at Amanda, and says, "I have a *feeling* that this is going to be a *much* more interesting story than I *thought*!" Jasmine mews and begins licking her paw.

Sadie giggles.

"A *Familiar*, Amanda," Bellinora says smiling at Jasmine, then turning to Amanda, "can be most *any* animal or insect at all. Cats... or *krispits* as Sadie calls them, *dragons*, eagles and various other birds - *rodents*, cucuteos, kikis, *toads*, lizards, snakes, etc. And they may be either *evil* in spirit, or *good*... just like the *witches* or *wizards* they serve."

Jasmine looks up and *mews* loudly, then seems to *mumble* to herself before continuing to eat.

"Oh, *sorry* Jasmine! I meant '*assist*' in your case... not *serve* of course!"

"The definition of a Familiar *varies* from realm to realm Amanda, and *even* from location to location *within* a realm. *Dark* witches, wizards, sorcerers and *sorceresses*, and other creatures, use the *Darker* side of Wizitch, and even call upon *Dark spirits* to serve them.

"Others, like *me*, serve the *Light*... the *good* side of Wizitch. *Our* Familiars are not of evil spirit, but spirits of the *Light*."

"Where did you *find* her?" Amanda asks smiling as she watches Jasmine slurping from her bowl of what looks to be milk.

"Oh, one does not *find* a Familiar Amanda. The Familiar... finds *you*... well, if you are *lucky* enough to be *chosen* by one. Jasmine found me *ages* ago, while I was walking in the village a

short way outside the palace.” Bellinora looks down at her hands and says sadly, “That seems like a *lifetime* ago now.”

After a pause, Bellinora looks up smiling and continues, “Jasmine told me she had been *watching* me for weeks, before making her decision to seek *Bonding* with me.

“You see, there is a *very* special connection between one and their Familiar. It is a *Wizitch* Bond, which will actually connect the *soul* of the Familiar, with their *Chosen*. Being a *very* smart feline, and not really being *sure* about me, she asked me if I would consent to a *trial* Bond of one year. I was *thrilled*, and gladly accepted.

“As soon as the Bond was made, we felt an *immediate* oneness. It was not *two* weeks later that she asked if I would *accept* her as my Familiar, *permanently*. I have *never* forgotten that day, and I will *always* be most *grateful*, for the *honor* to Bond with her.”

Jasmine stops drinking and sits up. She and Bellinora lock eyes for a moment. Jasmine tilts her head slightly and begins to purr.

“Jasmine and I have been *together* ever since, and have traveled extensively. A Familiar... *assists* their chosen in any way they can. And through the Bond, the *Familiar* takes on *many* of the powers of their Chosen. Jasmine is a *pretty* powerful Familiar.”

Jasmine tilts her head again and mews several times, then rolling her head up, nose in the air, looks back at the kids and purrs.

Bellinora laughs saying, “*Sorry*. Jasmine says that she is a *very* power Familiar, and that she likes to be *scratched* on her head, *behind* her ears, and *along* her back, should *any* of you get the urge to do so.”

Sadie giggles, scoots her way off the couch, runs to Jasmine, and begins scratching her behind her ears and along her back. Jasmine *lifts* her head, arches her back, and purrs *loudly* as everyone laughs.

After laughing along with the others, Bellinora says, “Now, if you do *not* mind, I would *really* like to know what brings you here Amanda.”

Amanda glances nervously to the others, then looking at Bellinora, reaches up with both hands into the top of her robe.

“Well... *this* actually,” and flips the necklace out from under her robe.

After the *slightest* hesitation, Bellinora gives a loud *cry* as her eyes fly wide. *Jumping* from the chair, she takes several *staggering* steps to the side, then stands back behind the chair, clamping *both* hands over her mouth.

Jasmine *leaps* from the pedestal with a cry of her own, then *shoots* down the long tunnel and out of sight, leaving poor *Sadie* standing frozen in place, her hand still where it was while scratching Jasmine’s back.

All the kids *jumped* to their feet as well, Anastasia and Cassandra *dumping* the plates on the floor from their lap. Thian jumped up *so* quickly and moved away *so* fast, that he knocked the *table* over that held their *drinks*, sending their contents across the floor and soaking into the *wonderful* rug.

Amanda jumped to her feet as well, looking even *more* frightened than anyone else.

Bellinora looks as though she may *faint*, eyes still wide and *staring* at the necklace around Amanda’s neck, the color *completely* gone from her beautiful face.

“What... what *about* her necklace?” Cassandra stutters swallowing hard. “It’s *just* some pretty *necklace* is all. It’s not *real* you know... Amanda *said* so herself.”

“She *lied*,” Tianna says calmly, bending to pick up her plate and scattered sandwich. “Thian, help me clean this up would you?”

Bellinora seems to come out of her frozen, *shocked* state, waves her hand and *all* the plates, *sandwiches* and drinks disappear. The tables jump back to their upright positions, and *new* plates, sandwiches and drinks reappear, the floor and rug, once again *spotless*.

"Soooo... I guess you *recognize* what this is then?" Amanda asks touching the necklace.

Bellinora quickly regains her composure, rounds her chair slowly, motioning for everyone to sit. She takes her seat *just* as Jasmine trots around the corner of the tunnel, a small *rolled* up scroll in her teeth. Trotting over to Bellinora, Jasmine jumps up onto Bellinora's lap, drops the scroll and *hisses* as she turns to look at Amanda, the *hair* on her back *bristling* as her tail flicks from side to side, *slapping* Bellinora *repeatedly* in the face.

"*Settle*," Bellinora says softly to Jasmine, who then curls up in Bellinora's lap, never taking her eyes from Amanda's necklace.

Bellinora stares intently into Amanda's eyes, then to the necklace, then back into Amanda's pleading eyes.

After a few tense heartbeats, Bellinora picks up the scroll then hesitates, taking a *steadying* breath. Unrolling the scroll, she begins to read *silently* to herself. The only thing Amanda can *hear*, is her *own* heavy breathing, and that of the others, as well as the *crackling* from the logs in the fireplace.

Slowly, Bellinora looks up from the scroll, then stands. Turning, she walks to a wall with *hundreds* of bottles packed tightly together. Without a word or *sound*, she *rises* off the ground to a height of about *twenty-five* feet. The kids all *gasp*, nervously looking from one to the other, as the woman continues *floating* up the wall.

"Stutterin' *Snorkrats!*" Anastasia says as she watches Bellinora floating higher up the shelves. Then in a lower voice says, "She's... she's a *Wizress!*"

"She's a... *what?*" Amanda asks in a whisper, turning to Anastasia.

"A *Wizress!*" Tianna answers in a low whisper. Amanda turns to look at Tianna as Tianna continues. "Remember when we all told you about what you call *Magic*, or *Magick* with the 'k' on the end, where *you* come from? And about the *difference* between a wizard, *sorcerer* and a sorceress? That the most *evil* wizards, who call upon the *Dark* side of *Wizitch*, and use *evil* spirits to do their bidding, were called *sorcerers* if they were male, and a *sorceress* if they were female?"

"Yeah..."

"Well," Tia begins softly as she looks around Tianna, "on the *Light* side of *Wizitch*... the *good* side... the most *powerful* witches, who have *all* the powers of the *greatest* wizard, *plus*, all the abilities of the most powerful *witch*, are called a *Wizress*. It's kind of like the *Light* sides word for a *good* sorceress.

"I've read and *heard* about them of course, but they're *extremely* rare. It seems their *abilities* are passed from *generation* to generation in their genes. It's actually become *part* of their DNA."

Watching Bellinora float to another shelf, Tia whispers, "Although, it's not like she's shooting *bolts* from just her *hands* or anything, which only a *true* *Wizress* can do. But, she *is* floating without a broom or *wand*, and she didn't say a *word* either. So... I think she *could* be one... maybe."

Bellinora searches through the bottles on a shelf for a moment, before retrieving an old dusty green one. Studying it for a moment, she floats to the right as she descends several feet to another shelf.

Rummaging around in *that* shelf, she retrieves another bottle, then floats around the room collecting several more bottles of various colors, *slipping* them into pockets within her gleaming

robe. She then drifts to the cavern floor, turns and walks to a table that has a small *cauldron* sitting on it. Placing the bottles on the table, she waves her hand and a *bright* blue flame *bursts* into view beneath the cauldron. After several minutes, while Bellinora intently studies the writing on the scroll, Amanda sees *steam* rising from the inside of the cauldron.

Everyone is scared, but *transfixed* as they watch Bellinora. No one speaks - just sit and watch, looking occasionally at one another with worried or *wonderstruck* expressions.

Bellinora puts the *carefully* measured contents from several bottles into the cauldron. Each time something is added, there is a *flash* of various colors, accompanied by a *hiss*. Bellinora is mumbling something as she stirs, first in *one* direction for some number of turns, then in the *opposite* direction, counting aloud the number of turns. Lifting the last bottle, she uncorks it, and a *greenish* vapor begins to rise. She tips the bottle and *pours* the contents into the cauldron.

There is a brilliant *flash* of green light from the cauldron, along with a *deafening* clap of thunder. Amanda and the others *jump* to their feet, once *again* knocking sandwiches from their laps, and turning over the tables.

Bright green vapor *swirls* up out of the cauldron, like a green *tornado*, the wider crown *tilting* from side to side as it continues to rise, reaching some *three* feet above the lip of the cauldron. The upper portion of the vapor *billows* out, as the tornado begins to settle into a kind of *upside-down* tear drop shape, the vapor winding and *twisting* down into the cauldron.

Bellinora is standing right in front of the cauldron, so Amanda has a *hard* time seeing the mist clearly. In a moment though, tilting her head to look around Bellinora's side slightly, Amanda sees what *looks* like the back of a women's *head* appear in the wide upper portion of the *mist-like* vapor. "Looks like long flowing *hair* too," she thinks.

Everyone's eyes are locked on the wavering hair within the mist. Their jaws *drop*, watching completely *dumbstruck*, as the head begins to turn, and the *distinct* profile of a woman's *face* comes into view. Amanda can only blink, as she watches *wide-eyed*, as the face turns slowly to look at Bellinora.

Amanda's eyes grow even wider, as her jaw drops further, when she *hears* a voice within the mist ask, "Why have you summoned me daughter? What has *happened*?"

"Mother, I need your help. I *believe* it has been found, after *all* these millennia! And, I believe I *truly* know *who* the Wielder is... and she has brought... some *special* friends... along with others. *Please*, do not reveal what I fear you will soon *suspect*... as I do.

"Mother, I *need* your help in authenticating... the *Artifact*, *before* we hear their story as to *how* it was found, and how... *she* was *allowed* to put it on. Mother... I believe the *Necklace of Power*... has been *found* at last!"

Bellinora steps aside and Amanda watches as the green face turns from Bellinora, and looks at all of the *startled* kids. As the eyes move from one to the other, in a *flash*, the eyes land on Amanda, shooting *wide* with recognition.

The face gives a *cry* of surprise, then a look of *fear*, as the eyes *lock* onto the necklace. This of course, makes *everyone* frightened, and Amanda quickly looks to her friends, whose eyes are as *wide* as hers, all *clutching* one another, faces drained of color.

"Daughter... could it *truly* be?" the face asks looking intently at the necklace around Amanda's neck. Then slowly, as the wavering face looks harder, says, "Yes, it *does* indeed look like... the *Artifact*!"

The face looks into Amanda's eyes. For a long moment, Amanda and the eyes in the green mist lock onto one another. The eyes within the mist *again* go wide, then *snap* around to look at Bellinora.

Bellinora nods saying, “Yes, *I* think so too... but say *nothing*! And that is not all...” Bellinora turns to look back to the frightened kids and nods toward them.

The face looks at the couch where Sadie, Anastasia and Cassandra are now standing, holding *tightly* to one another, looking as though they may *bolt* from the cavern at any moment.

The face studies each of them for a moment, then settles on the *frightened* Sadie. The face looks Sadie over *very* carefully, then looks at Bellinora for a brief moment.

Bellinora smiles, and nods. With a slight tilt of her head, she motions toward the others. The weaving face slowly turns back and looks to the couch where Thian, Tianna and Tia are holding onto one another, Thian in front.

In an *instant*, the eyes within the mist *lock* on Thian’s for a long moment, and her *misty* jaw drops. The face then slowly turns to look at Tianna, hesitates, then looks at Tia, studying their faces intently. “Great *Mother* of Creation... it is not *possible*...” the stunned face turns back to look at Bellinora, “*Is* it?”

“I do not know mother, but *you* see it too, *don’t* you?”

“Yes... *yes* I do! But *how*? And *how* in all the ways of *Wizitch* could this have *happened*? And the *Necklace of Power*? On... *her*? Why... she is just a *child*! How would this even be *possible*?”

“Again, I do not know. But *first*, we need to know if that truly *is* the *Necklace of Power*. Mother... *one* more thing,” Bellinora hesitates, looking to Jasmine for a moment, then says, “Josh and Sam are the ones who *sent* her here to meet me. To ask for... *my* help!”

The face in the mist *snaps* around so quickly, it sends up a *huge* swirl of green vapor that, for a moment, makes the face become *completely* distorted and elongated. The face soon regains its *wavering* shape, looking with surprise at Bellinora. “Josh... and Sam?” The face turns to Amanda and the others. “*They* know Josh and Sam? *How*? From *where*?” The face swirls and looks back to Bellinora. “Are you *sure* dear?”

“Yes mother. They had... *this*...” and holds up the ring that Amanda had given her.

Even through the constantly moving and *distorting* green mist, Amanda can see that the face looks *shocked* as it sees the ring resting in Bellinora’s outstretched hand.

“I have *already* verified it mother... it *is* his. And this ring, along with *Josh* and Sam sending them here... leads me to believe the *necklace* will be the real thing too. But we need to be *sure* before going any further - *before* we hear their story. We need to know, if it is *indeed* the *Necklace of Power*... how *strong* the bond between *she* and the necklace have already become. Will you help me?”

The wavering face looks at the frightened kids standing at the edges of the couches, then to Amanda, and at Amanda’s necklace.

Giving what Amanda thinks is a slight smile, eyes *filled* with wonder, the voice from the mist says softly, “You could not *keep* me from it.”

## The Test

### [To TOC](#)

Bellinora nods to the face, then turns to the children. "Please, take your seats and *calm* yourselves. As I have said, I will not hurt *any* of you..."

Then looking at Amanda, says, "If it can *possibly* be helped that is. Please, *sit*." Bellinora waves her hand and the spilled drinks, scattered sandwiches and *lapkins* vanish. The tables are restored to their upright positions, as new *drinks*, sandwiches and *lapkins* reappear, the floor and rug, once again *spotless*.

The kids slowly return to their seats, but *this* time, Sadie *hurries* over to take a seat next to Tianna, and leans against her, while taking Tianna's hand in hers. This leaves Anastasia and *Cassandra* on the other couch by themselves. Amanda looks around nervously at the others, then taking her seat, looks back to Bellinora.

"Before we get started, I would like to *introduce* you all to my mother, *Ellanya*, who passed away *many* years ago. She now appears in her *spirit* form, whenever I need her help... which has been *often* over the ages." Bellinora smiles at Ellanya, who smiles and seems *somehow* to shrug, though without any *shoulders* to do so.

"And now mother, I would like to introduce *you* to our guests... please say *naught*, and try *not* to react if possible."

Bellinora turns toward the right hand couch, smiles and says, "May I present to you, Miss *Cassandra* and Miss Anastasia."

Ellanya gives what *appears* to be a bow, and says, "An *honor* to meet you ladies."

Anastasia and Cassandra, still frightened, look nervously to one another for a brief moment, then Anastasia says, "Uh, hi. Pleased to, um, meet *you* too." Cassandra swallows hard and says, "Yeah, hi. Are you *really* dead?" the face just gives a thin smile, and nods.

"And now mother, I would like to introduce you to the one who *seeks* our help. Miss... *Amanda*."

Amanda is watching Ellanya, waving around in the *vapor* coming from the cauldron, when her name is spoken. Ellanya's eyes grow *wide* as her mouth opens slightly. Amanda and Ellanya lock eyes. A few seconds pass before Amanda says softly, "It's a *pleasure* to meet you Ellanya."

Then bowing forward, Amanda says, "May the *valleys* you now walk, forever be *green*, and the *Great Mother* watch over you."

Everyone turns to look at Amanda, who has just straightened from her low bow, and who has a rather *startled* expression on her face. Bellinora and Ellanya turn to face one another for a moment, then turn back to look at the startled Amanda.

"And may the *Lord* of the Elves watch over you child," Ellanya says with what must be a bow of her own.

"Interesting. And *now* mother," Bellinora says slowly, "it is my *pleasure* to introduce you to..." Bellinora pauses while she and Ellanya focus on little Sadie, who looks like a *trapped* animal. Bellinora then says with a smile, "Jasmine's *favorite* guest... who gives *excellent* head scratches I am told... Miss *Sadie*."

It seems to Amanda, that there is an *extensive* pause, then Sadie, clinging tightly to Tianna's arm says, "*Hi* Ellanya. Nice to *see* you. I *like* Jasmine... she's soft like *Puddles*, and a good *purrer* too."

Bellinora and Ellanya both laugh, making the others laugh nervously too, somewhat breaking the tension.

For a few moments, Ellanya's eyes *fix* on Sadie's. Ellanya's face then changes into an *odd* expression Amanda does not recognize. Ellanya says, "It is an *honor* to have one of the *mighty* Keptic in our presence."

Ellanya seems to lean forward within the vapor, her eyes narrowing and her expression becoming more serious. She then looks *hard* at Sadie and says, "Té Äl Tiesta Öu!"

Sadie *stiffens*, eyes *wide* as she clings so tightly to Tianna, Tianna cries, "*Ouch!* Sadie, your *fangernails*." Sadie relaxes her grip as she swallows hard, looking down at the table in front of her. After a brief moment, Sadie looks back up into Ellanya's eyes.

Amanda turns and asks Anastasia in a whisper, "Do you know what, Té Äl Tiesta Öu means?"

"Yeah, well, I *think* anyway. It's in an even *more* ancient witch language than the ones I spoke, and *you* all learned before, when you did... *whatever* it was you did. I learned it a few years ago. But what she *said* doesn't make any sense. It means, 'I *know* what you are, your *secret* is safe.' I mean, of *course* she knows what she is. She's *Keptic*. But *what* secret?"

When Amanda looks back at Ellanya, she notices that Ellanya and Sadie have locked eyes, and are now *intensely* focused on one another, both unblinking.

Soon, Ellanya shakes her head, smiles and speaking very slowly and kindly says, "No... you *do not* child. You have *nothing* to prove to *anyone*, and need not try. You need not *atone* for what your *ancestors* have done. You are *not* as they were.

"You are of a *greater* meld... but the *struggle* to maintain the *Light*, will forever be a *burden* for you. I believe, you *have* chosen the right path. I *think*..."

Bellinora quickly says, "And sitting *next* to Sadie, I would like to present, Miss *Tianna*, and her... *sister*... Tia."

"That's odd," Amanda thinks, "I don't think we ever said *anything* about them being *sisters*. Did we?"

Ellanya turns, her eyes resting on the two girls. The hesitation, and *something* in Ellanya's eyes, make *Amanda* turn to look at Tianna and Tia, as do the others. Amanda then looks back to Ellanya.

With an odd smile, Ellanya says, "It is a *pleasure* to... *meet* you, Tianna, Tia."

"The pleasure is *ours*," Tianna says bowing, Tia following her lead.

"And now mother, may I introduce... Master *Thian*."

Amanda watches as the eyes within the waving vapor shoot *wide* for the slightest moment, then return to a somewhat *forced*, but smiling face, which clearly bows low. "It is a *great* pleasure to be in your presence... *Master Thian*."

Thian bows, and with a smile says, "The *pleasure*, Ellanya, is that *you*, honor *us* with your presence. I am at your service."

Ellanya now gives a genuine, *warm* smile to Thian, then turns to Bellinora. "I cannot *wait* to hear the story behind *this!* Let us *test* the *Artifact* and see if... well, if it really *is* the *Necklace of Power*."

Bellinora nods, and turning to Amanda says, "Amanda, would you step over *here* please. It is alright, *come*... please stand over *here* with Ellanya and I."

Amanda gets up slowly, looking to Thian and the others. She slowly walks to where Bellinora is standing next to Ellanya, who studies her carefully. Amanda is then led to stand about four feet from them.

Ellanya studies the necklace very carefully, and says, "It matches the *description* to the letter. If you will *position* her please dear."

Amanda walks with Bellinora some distance from where Ellanya is still *waving* in the vapor, Ellanya *clearly* scrutinizing each *nuance* of Amanda's every movement.

Bellinora turns to face Ellanya asking, "Is *this* all right mother?"

"Yes, that will do dear. Please step *away* from her and make ready."

Bellinora steps away, then looking to the other children says, "Would you all stand and move to the far side of the room please?" As they stand, Bellinora waves her hand. The tables, *chairs*, couches, drinks and *sandwiches* vanish, leaving only a very large open floor.

"Uh... *ready*?" Amanda asks with a shaking voice, watching her friends move toward one of the huge shelves. "Ready for... *what*?"

"Just *try* to relax Amanda," Bellinora says as she steps several more yards from her. "We need to *try* a few things, to be sure the necklace you wear *is* the real thing... which for everyone's sake, especially *yours*, I truly hope is *not*."

"Amanda, would you take the necklace *off* please," Bellinora says evenly.

"I've already *tried*. *Lots* of times. But it won't *come* off. We even tried to *cut* it off, but nothing happened. It didn't even get *scratched*."

Bellinora and Ellanya exchange looks, then Bellinora says, "Would you try *again* please, so we may observe for ourselves."

Amanda blinks a couple times, then grabs the necklace with both hands and begins to lift it up. It *instantly* appears to shrink tighter around her the higher she lifts it, until it is simply *too* tight to get up over her head. She pulls and *tugs* hard, but it simply will not come off. When she lets it go, it once again *lengthens*, and drapes nicely around her neck.

Again, Bellinora and Ellanya look to one another, but give no change in their even expression.

"Thank you Amanda. Alright. Should we do the *language* test now mother?"

"It may not be necessary to start that close to the *top* of the list dear. With what we have seen already, and since Josh and *Sam* sent her here... I think we can *skip* ahead a good deal. May I choose *where* to begin dear?"

Bellinora nods.

Ellanya looks at Amanda and asks, "Do you know what the... *Kroyorestiana* is?"

A jolt *shoots* through Amanda, making her involuntarily *stiffen*, as she gives a little shudder. "No..."

"Did you *catch* that dear? The little *flash* in her eyes and the *stiffening*?" Ellanya asks leaning forward, the vapor making her face distort. "Ready *dear*?" Ellanya asks.

Bellinora nods, turning to look intently at Amanda.

The way Bellinora and Ellanya are focused on her, Thian thinks Amanda looks like she has been asked for the *answer* to a question she has not *studied* for, and has now been asked to the *front* of the class to answer it.

Ellanya's face suddenly changes to one of *intense* concentration. She closes her eyes and begins *mumbling* something Amanda cannot quite hear.

Thian watches as a *long* wooden staff appears from thin air behind Amanda. It begins to *whip* around as though an invisible *martial* artist is controlling it.

Amanda's hair starts to *rise* off her back, and begins trailing slightly out behind her, as she stares fixedly at Ellanya.

"All of you... get *back* against that far back wall! Place your backs *flat* against it, and *stay* there... *move*!" Bellinora commands.

They did *not* have to be told twice. The kids run to the far side of the room where there is a blank wall, and gather close to one another, backs pressed hard against the wall. All are looking from Amanda, to the twirling staff behind her, to Bellinora and Ellanya... then *back* to Amanda.

Ellanya opens her eyes, an expression of *intense* anger, which *scares* the kids terribly.

Turning her head slightly to the side, Ellanya's brows *narrow* as she focuses on the staff. The staff begins to move *quickly* to one side. As Amanda turns to follow it, Bellinora waves her hand and Amanda's wand *shoots* out of its pouch, soars across the room, and *lands* in Bellinora's opened hand. Amanda did not even *try* to grab it.

The staff *snaps* forward to *strike* Amanda as her friends cry out in surprise.

Amanda's hair shoots *straight* up and behind her, snapping *violently* in some unseen wind storm. Amanda quickly *spins* to the side, doing two *full* circular spins. Then, just stands there, looking at the whipping staff doing figure eights, her arms still at her sides.

"What's *happening*?" Cassandra asks Tianna who is on one side of her, her voice trembling.

"I don't really *know*. But get ready for *quite* a show... this *should* get interesting... *belieeeeee* me."

Bellinora waves her hand, and a pail blue, *semi-transparent* wall instantly *surrounds* the room, about two feet in front of the startled children. All the kids put their hands out and *press* against the transparent wall, which stretches from *floor* to ceiling, making a *complete* circle around the room. Bellinora *and* Ellanya are behind the wall as well. Only *Amanda* and the staff are on the other side, within the large room.

It looks to Thian, as if the floating staff and Amanda are in some kind of *arena*, ready to do battle.

"What *is* this?" Cassandra asks frantically, pushing hard against the transparent wall.

"Some kind of *energy* shield spell, I *think*," Thian says as he watches another staff materialize at Amanda's feet.

Amanda bends slowly, her eyes never leaving the spinning staff. She picks up the long staff and seems to *test* its balance in her hands. When she turns to follow the other, *constantly* moving staff, Thian looks at Amanda's face. "By the *moons*... look at her *eyes*."

Tia and Tianna let out a short cry, as they look at Amanda's stone-like expression, then to her eyes.

"*Uh oh*," Tianna says softly. "The *last* time they were violet..." she looks first to Tia, then to Thian. They both nod, remembering the *wild* things Amanda had done before, when she had somehow *connected* to the powers within of the necklace.

The whipping staff comes to a still hover a short distance in front of Amanda. The kids find themselves looking between the staff and Amanda. No one *moves*, no one says a word... too frightened to do anything but *stare* at Amanda.

Amanda moves into some kind of stance. She begins whipping her own staff in a *blurring* figure eight several times, using only her right hand. She then whips it to her right side, lifting the staff above her head. She spins in a *complete* circle in one direction, with the *staff* spinning quickly over her head in the *opposite* direction in her flattened palm. Amanda then *somehow*, drops low, into an *aggressive* stance, the staff coming to rest in both hands.

The jaws *drop* on Thian, Tia and Tianna. Sadie, Anastasia and Cassandra not only have their *eyes* popping and mouths completely open, they are clearly *stunned*, and *very* frightened.

Thian looks at Bellinora, just in time to see her nod to Ellanya. Ellanya turns, her face changing into one of *intense* concentration.

The floating staff *jumps* to the side, arcs low, *striking* at Amanda's ankles. Amanda does a complete *back flip*, *high* into the air, landing on her feet where she is *immediately* attacked again.

The kids *gasp* as one, riveted in place, watching, as in a *blur*, the floating staff strikes *again* and again at Amanda from *every* conceivable angle. Amanda is whipping her staff *so* fast to counter the blows, they can *hardly* see it. But they can hear the *horrifying* strikes as the two staffs repeatedly *slam* into one another with *crushing* force.

Amanda is *jumping*, flipping, *diving* and rolling. At one point, Amanda avoids being hit by the staff, from the *phantom* wielder, by *tossing* her spinning staff high in the air away and behind her, while doing several rapid *back* flips, leaping *high* into the air, *catching* her staff... still spinning... *lands* and stands there with a *blank* look on her face.

After no more than several *heartbeats*, the blurring attacks begin again. After only four more minutes, as Amanda has flipped *high* in the air, landing once again *lightly* on her feet after doing a *spectacular* fully *twisting* aerial maneuver, the *phantom* wielder stops spinning the staff, and the staff glides several yards back.

In a *brilliant* flash, as the floating staff vanishes, followed by Amanda's. Amanda turns to face Ellanya, standing there as if she is *bored*. With Amanda's eyes now resting on Ellanya, Amanda gives a slight *forward* tilt of her head, as if saying, "*Really... can't you do any better than that?*"

"Where did Amanda learn to *do* all... *that?*" Cassandra asks with a frightened voice. "Who the heck *is* she anyway?" Then looking to Thian, "Did *you* know she could do all *this?*"

Thian does not answer. He is transfixed at the *complete* change in Amanda. It is very clear, that *this* is not the Amanda *he* knows. *His* Amanda, when he had first met her, was very shy and had *little* self-confidence. She is the *kindest*, most *gentle* person he knows... next to Tia, who does her *best* never to hurt anyone or anything. The Amanda Thian knows, would not *hurt* anyone either, if she did not *have* to. Amanda is someone who has become a *fierce* friend, and would give *all* she has to help others.

This is *not* the Amanda he knows at all. He now knows for *sure*, that it is the *necklace* controlling Amanda. It has somehow *awakened*, and has *taken* over her body. *It* is controlling *her...* not the other way around.

Thian looks to this new Amanda, standing there with her hair *snapping* like thousands of tiny *whips*, sticking out and slightly above her head. The sight of her *standing* there, not moving, but the sound of her hair *snapping* in some unseen violent windstorm, is enough to instill *bone* shaking fear in all.

A gleaming, *curved*, razor sharp, *double* edged long sword materializes out of thin air, floating about fifteen feet away from Amanda. It begins to whip around, then starts to circle Amanda.

Amanda has not moved. She is still looking intently at Ellanya, with an odd crooked smile. *Another* long sword appears right in front of Amanda's chest. Amanda takes it with her *left* hand, and lowers it slowly, where it comes to rest at her side.

Thian turns to Tianna saying, "*What's* she doing? She's *right* handed. I've never seen her use her *left* hand for much of *anything* before. Have *you?*"

"No. *Never. This* should be interesting."

The phantom wielder of the sword has moved directly behind Amanda, about five feet away. The blade is now floating in a vertical position, blade up.

In a *flash*, the sword flips around in a complete circle and *strikes* at the top center of Amanda's skull. Amanda quickly *spins* around, parrying the blow easily, sending the blade to

one side, as she quickly *pulls* her sword in tight to her body, hilt at her waist, blade pointing straight up, and does three *quick* full turning circular steps to the side.

Lowering her sword to her left side once again, she faces Ellanya and gives a kind of short bow, then turns to face the phantom wielder of the other blade.

The floating sword begins a *frightening* flurry of attacks, parries and retreats. The blades are flashing *so* fast, Tianna can no longer tell *whose* blade belongs to whom. The sound of the blades *slamming* into one another, send up what looks like electrical *sparks* – sending *chills* through everyone.

Sadie is crying and clinging *tightly* to Tianna yelling, “Make them *stop!* Make them *stop!*”

Amanda is quickly *parrying* the phantom wielders sword, as she is forced back, *right* into the wall where Thian, Tianna and Sadie are standing. Anastasia and Cassandra are huddled right beside them. As Amanda presses her back against the glowing shield wall *right* where Thian is standing, Amanda *snaps* her head to the right, *just* as the point of the phantoms sword passes her ear, and *strikes* the shield *directly* in front of Thian’s stunned face.

Thian’s eyes *fly* wide, as his eyes *cross* for an instant, looking at where the blade would have struck him, *square* between the eyes. Before Thian can react, Amanda has stepped to the side. The phantom wielders sword seems to be *stuck* in the shield for a moment, but then pulls free, and *once* again, the phantoms blade *strikes* at Amanda. She *twists* her body sharply. The razor sharp point passes her by, *slamming* into the transparent shield, right where the *center* of Tianna’s chest is, only inches away.

As Amanda and the spinning phantoms blade quickly move away, Thian and Tianna lock *terrified* eyes, clutching tightly to each other, with Sadie *still* clinging onto Tianna’s leg. They quickly turn back to watch the continuing battle.

After a good three minutes of unending *fury*, Amanda *jumps* into the air, doing a very *tight* forward flip. She brings the sword in her left hand down *so* quickly, and with *so* much force, it *snaps* the other sword cleanly in half, sending up a *brilliant* flash of red and orange sparks.

The front half of the severed sword *whirls* through the air, then strikes and *sticks* in the shield wall, mere *inches* away from Bellinora’s heart.

Amanda looks at the frightened Thian and Tianna, then to the tiny Sadie, whose tears are *streaming* down her little face, chin quivering.

Thian looks into Amanda’s *piercing*, brilliant violet eyes, which seem to look right *through* him. Amanda turns to Ellanya with a slight smile on her face.

After throwing down her sword, Amanda’s sword and both parts of the broken one vanish. Holding her hands up and slightly in front of her, Amanda shrugs, as though asking, “Is that *all* you’ve got old woman?”

“By the *Flames* of Reann,” Anastasia says in a daze. “I’ve never seen *anyone* like her. I didn’t know anyone could *move* that fast. And her *gymnastics* are... *unbelievable!*”

Thian watches as Ellanya seems to give an angry snarl, then looks slightly to the side of Amanda.

A sphere of around *ten* inches suddenly appears just to the left of Amanda. The sphere is composed of *nothing* but radiating electrical discharges, inside what *looks* like a *clear* crystal ball, flashing like *thousands* of tiny bolts of lightning. The bolts are a *brilliant* blue-white, the electrical discharges making a horrible *sizzling* and *snapping* sound, causing the hair on Thian’s neck to stand up.

“Is... is *that* what I *think* it is?” Tia asks no one in particular.

“Yeah. I think it *is*,” Anastasia says with a shaky voice. “But, I’ve only *read* about them, in one of the old books on *weapons* of the Ancients.

I think it’s known as *Thor’s* Destroyer. I read that it’s supposed to be able to penetrate *any* armor or *shield*, and will completely *vaporize* what it strikes. It said it leaves *no* trace behind either. You... you don’t *really* think they’re going to use it on *Amanda* do you?!”

Amanda looks at the brilliant electrical bolts *snapping* and sizzling within the slowly rotating crystal ball, floating slightly to one side. Instantly, the slightly glowing *silver* bubble Thian, Tianna, Tia and *Sadie* had seen around Amanda several times before, appears.

Turning around, Amanda looks back to her friends for a moment. She is only a couple feet away from them. Her bright *violet* eyes actually seem to be pulsing a kind of *light* of their own. Amanda turns, walking away from them, back to the very center of the room.

Bellinora and Ellanya exchange a quick glance. Amanda turns away from the ball slightly, to look *directly* at Ellanya and Bellinora. Ellanya focuses intently on the snapping ball. Amanda looks over her shoulder, looking at the ball as well, watching it spin *faster* and faster. Amanda then turns completely around, facing the sizzling ball, and simply *crosses* her arms.

“What’s she *doing*?!” Sadie screams, clearly shaking. “She doesn’t have anything to *defend* herself with! This isn’t *fair*! Can’t we *do*...?”

The snapping ball, filled with bolts of *sizzling* lightning, shoots forward and *strikes* Amanda’s silver bubble. The kids *scream* as a *tremendous* flash causes them to clamp their eyes shut and turn away. The entire cavern *shakes* violently, books and other items falling from shelves. Even through the *Wizitched*, transparent shield wall, the vaporizing *heat* is almost unbearable.

Thian, feeling as though he may actually *burst* into flames for a moment, slowly opens his tear-filled eyes, quickly wipes his eyes on his sleeve, then looks to where he had last seen Amanda. The spot is nothing but *millions* of sparks of various colors.

Thian screams, “*Noooo!*”

The other kids open their eyes, and look to where they had last seen Amanda. They too are crying loudly, completely *stunned* and horrified at what they have just witnessed.

Sadie buries her face into Tianna’s leg, and is crying *harder* than any of them. The others watch, *shaken* to their very core, as the sparks begin to *thin* and dissolve near the top, but *no* Amanda is to be seen.

“You *killed* her!” Tianna screams rounding on Bellinora and Ellanya. “You *murdered* her... we *trusted* you!”

Sadie turns her tiny head to the side, and as she looks at the dissipating sparks now nearing the floor, turns *fully* around, points her little arm and yells, “Look! She’s *there*! Look!”

Everyone looks intensely at the rapidly thinning sparks, slowly beginning to clear as they descend. Thian, wipes his tears once again on his sleeve, and stares in *disbelief* as Amanda’s form comes *clearly* into view. She is *sitting* crossed legged on the floor, her elbows resting on her legs, her chin *calmly* resting in her hands.

Thian turns to look to Tianna, who has her mouth fully open, eyes wide, filled with tears, staring at the calmly sitting Amanda.

Amanda slowly gets to her feet, *snaps* her fingers, and the silver bubble disappears.

Ellanya turns to Bellinora with a rather *worried*, but *satisfied* expression, then nods.

Bellinora nods her understanding back, then waves her hand. The protective wall around the room vanishes. The *second* it does, Amanda turns to look to the kids, as though checking to see that they are alright.

Bellinora lunges *forward* and low, with *both* her hands shooting out quickly in front of her, palms forward. Two golden, *shimmering* globes of *fire* burst forth from her outstretched palms, one from each palm. A moment after the globes leave her palms, two *more* burst from them and shoot toward Amanda, followed by two *more*, then two *more* - eight globes in total.

Amanda *snaps* around when the first two globes reach her. This is the *first* time Amanda looks *startled* and confused.

Just as the *first* two globes reach Amanda, they *combine* and burst into a large, *vertical*, *flaming* circular ring, like a large *hoop*. The hoop is about ten inches thick. The hoop quickly *flips* up over Amanda's head, and slides down her form, in a *horizontal* position. It slides down to about the height of her ankles.

The *next* two balls have combined in a brilliant flash, forming another flaming hoop, which *whips* over Amanda and rapidly *drops* to about the height of her knees.

The next two globes *burst* into another flaming hoop, flip over Amanda's head as Amanda holds out her arms like she is trying to *push* it away. It simply slides *through* her arms and goes to her chest.

The last two globes *burst*, form a *flaming* hoop, and flip over Amanda's head.

Thian and the others watch in stunned *horror*, as the four flaming hoops begin *rising* and dropping through one another, from Amanda's *head*, to her ankle. Over and *over*, faster and faster they change position.

Amanda actually looks *frightened* now, and somewhat *frantic*. Her head is snapping *up* and down, like trying to find a way *out*. Soon, her entire *body* begins to grow rigid, then begins shaking *violently*, as though she is having *seizure*.

"*Stop* it!" Thian screams. "*Stop* it! You're *killing* her!"

Ellanya and Bellinora are intently focused on Amanda, and do not see Thian nudge Tianna as he pulls his wand. Tianna glances at Thian, nods and draws her own.

"*NOW!*" Thian yells. Both Thian and Tianna fire two *quick* bolts each at Bellinora, who is standing *calmly* watching Amanda shake like a *rag* doll.

Holding her right hand up, with a couple quick *slapping* motions of her wrist, all *four* bolts are deflected, striking the ground harmlessly to her side in *thousands* of sparks. She does not even *turn* around to face them.

In another few moments, the flaming hoops around Amanda suddenly *vanish*. Amanda remains standing for a few heartbeats, then *drops* to the floor and does not move.

Thian, Tianna, Tia and Sadie shoot forward toward Amanda. Thian again screaming, "*Noooo!* You *killed* her! Amanda! Please... *Amanda*... No!"

Thian drops to his knees on one side of Amanda, Tianna and Sadie on the other. With tears *streaming* down their faces, Thian looks at Amanda's limp body. With his chin *quivering* as he looks at Tianna's, Tia's and Sadie's tear-streaked faces, he hears a *grown* and snaps his head down.

"Amanda?" Thian asks touching the side of Amanda's face. "Amanda? Can you *hear* me?"

Amanda slowly opens her eyes, seeing a blurry image begin to clear. "Thian?" she asks softly in a puzzled tone.

As her head begins to clear, Amanda looks over and sees Tianna, Tia and Sadie, all crying *hard*, but laughing at the same time.

"What... what *happened*?" Amanda asks as Thian helps her sit up. Shaking her head again to help clear it, she asks, "Why... *why* am I on the *ground*? Why are you all *crying*?"

Bellinora steps over and says calmly, "Please help her up, and to her seat." Bellinora waves her hand and the couches, chairs and tables once again appear, along with her own chair.

Jasmine, who has been watching near the entrance to the tunnel, scampers across the floor and jumps up onto her pedestal, where she sits watching as Thian and Tianna help the slightly wobbly Amanda to her chair.

"Please, take your seats," Bellinora says calmly with a smile. "Amanda will be fine. Please, *do* as I ask, and all take your seats." Bellinora then walks to Amanda and holds out her hand, which has Amanda's wand in it.

"That's... *mine*. How... how did *you* get it? The last thing I remember is... you asked me if I knew some strange *word* I didn't know."

"Do you remember feeling... *anything*... when Ellanya *said* that word?"

Amanda thinks about it for a minute, then says, "Well, I felt a kind of... *I* don't know, *jolt* of some sort. That's the *last* thing I remember."

Bellinora turns and waves her hand. The table that has the cauldron on it, begins to rise and move through the air, Ellanya's vaporous face *distorting* as it floats closer. The table comes to rest beside Bellinora's chair.

Bellinora takes her seat and looking at Ellanya says, "Well mother, as much as I had hoped this was *not* the *Necklace of Power*, I am afraid we have now *proven* that it is. It has, *indeed* been found at last.

"But as to the story behind how *Amanda* came to be the *Wielder*? I simply cannot wait to hear.

"By the way... Thian, *Tianna*... the *next* time you two try to fire off spells... I would *suggest* that you do not *advertise* so loudly, when you are going to *do* it." She then smiles, as Thian and Tianna turn slightly red, and give weak smiles of their own while nodding.

Thian says, "Sorry. I thought you *were* really going to kill her. I... we... *couldn't* let you do that. We had to *try* to stop you anyway - no matter *what* happened."

"Of *course* you did!" Ellanya says with a laugh. "We had expected *some* of you might. After all, you *are* her friends. But like we stated before, we wish to harm *no* one, unless it is *absolutely* necessary.

"Sorry I frightened you all, but there was *no* time to explain what we were going to do. We needed to test the *Artifact*, and how *Amanda* controlled it. The thing is... it appears that the *Artifact* was more in control of *her*, than the other way around."

"Did I... well, *do* something I can't remember again then?" Amanda asks turning to Thian.

"*I'll* say! We couldn't *believe* it! We'll *tell* you about it later."

"Look at her *eyes*," Tia says softly. "One's *violet* and the other's... bright *blue*!"

"Well, she *does* have a way with color," Thian says with a nervous laugh.

The others laugh nervously too, and seeing her friends smiling at her, Amanda gives a weak smile herself.

Once Amanda has *assured* everyone that she *is* okay, Bellinora waves her hand, and once again, *sandwiches* and drinks appear on the tables with even *more* treats for Jasmine.

Bellinora turns to Amanda. "Well Amanda, I think it is time you give us the *full* story. And please, leave *nothing* out, no matter *how* insignificant you believe it to be to you. It may after all, be *very* important in our helping you. Do you *understand* dear?"

Amanda smiles saying, "That's *exactly* what Josh and *Sam* said, when I told *them* the whole thing. This is going to *take* a while though, so you better get comfortable."

Jasmine lets out what sounds like a *deep* sigh, then curls up on her padded pedestal, next to Bellinora.

Jasmine places her head between her paws, and lets out *another* long sigh. Everyone laughs.

## Amanda's Story

[To TOC](#)

Amanda begins, "Well, the *whole* thing started when I was back on earth and..."

Bellinora and Ellanya gasp, Bellinora saying quickly, "Earth?! You mean, you came from the *earth* realm?"

"Well, *yeah*. That's where I found the *necklace* and stuff actually. Then I went to someplace called *The Deep Forest Elves*. That's where I met *Thian*, Tia and Tianna, Loki, *Sadie* and a few others too. Oh, and *that's* where I met Josh and Sam. After that, we came here, to *The Realm of The Witches*."

"Great *Mother*! This realm has not been called that in... well, a *very* long time. This is going to be even *more* interesting than we thought!" Ellanya says swirling up a curl of vapor.

Cassandra leans over to Anastasia whispering, "She *can't* be from the earth realm, she's *lying*... isn't she?"

"Amanda, I am sure there is a *good* deal to your tale," Bellinora says softly. "We would like you please, to tell us *everything* you can remember, about your *life*, including your *parents*, up to the point you feel your current story begins."

Nodding, Amanda takes a long sip of the wonderful ice-cream filled drink before starting her story.

Of course, Thian, Tianna and Tia have heard the entire story several times, but never get tired of hearing it, *especially* now that they know every *bit* of it is true. And, after all, they *have* played their own part in the overall story thus far.

Anastasia, Cassandra and Sadie all listen intently, wanting to find out what *all* this is about, and *how* Amanda had found an ancient, *powerful*, Wizitch item Bellinora calls the *Necklace of Power*.

Amanda tells them she doesn't know who her real parents were, but recounts the story told to her, as to how she had been found on a doorstep, in some kind of *wicker* basket, and how an old woman thought her crying was some fool *cat*, and had come to the door to throw a shoe at it, and had found *her* instead. Both Bellinora and Ellanya look briefly to one another.

"Amanda," Ellanya asks as she slowly weaves in the green vapor. "Do you remember them saying anything about, what may have been in the basket *with* you when they found you?"

"Oh, *yeah*... sorry. There was a note, and of course, the *blanket* I was wrapped in. The note said something like, 'Her name is Amanda Ackers...'"

Both Ellanya and Bellinora cry out, looking quickly to one another, then to Jasmine, who has not taken her eyes from Amanda. They look back at Amanda, not saying a word.

"*What?*" Amanda asks looking confused.

"N... Nothing, *please* continue," Bellinora says, reaching for a drink of her own, her hands *clearly* shaking.

"Well, like I was saying. It said, 'Her *name* is Amanda Ackers, she is *eleven* months old. Please take good care of her.' That's *all* it said."

Again, Bellinora and Ellanya exchange wide-eyed glances.

"I was told," Amanda continues, "that the police looked for my *real* mom and dad, but didn't find them. I was also told that... well, they *obviously* didn't love me, and didn't *want* me either. The only other thing that was with me, was the *blanket* I'd been wrapped in."

"Daughter... it *has* to be..." Ellanya says wide eyed.

“Mother please,” Bellinora cuts her off. Then looking back to Amanda, “I do not suppose anyone told you what the blanket *looked* like, did they?” Bellinora asks hopefully, tears forming in her eyes. “But, well, of course... that was after all, a *very* long time ago...”

“Oh, they didn’t *have* to tell me about it. I’ve *seen* it. Not only that, I still *have* it! I know it’s *silly* really. But it’s the only thing I *have* from my real mom and dad. I *still* take it with me wherever I go, when I *can* anyway.”

“You... you still *have* it?” Ellanya asks, her eyes seeming to wave in the vapor. “Where?”

“Well... actually,” Amanda says turning a little pink from embarrassment, as she looks at her friends. “It’s in the *closet* tunnel, in my backpack.”

Bellinora waves her hand and they hear a door open. In a moment, Amanda’s backpack floats into the room. All eyes are wide, as they watch it float over to, then lower at Amanda’s feet.

“Would you be kind enough to *show* it to us?” Bellinora asks, sitting forward to the edge of her chair.

“Okay. *Sure...*” and with a puzzled expression, Amanda reaches down and picks up the pack. “But, well, it’s a little *dirty*, and a little *frayed* too. But...”

Opening the top of the pack, she reaches into a smaller compartment, and pulls out a neatly folded, but faded blanket.

“It has a *cool* but really *odd* symbol on it too... *see...*” Amanda shakes out the blanket as it unfolds and hangs vertically facing Bellinora and Ellanya.

Bellinora lets out a small cry, as does Ellanya. Bellinora has both hands *clamped* over her mouth, her eyes *quickly* filling with tears.

Amanda and the others freeze, not expecting *this* kind of a reaction from an old *dirty* and faded blanket, and not knowing *how* to react themselves.

Bellinora waves a trembling hand. The blanket slowly leaves Amanda’s shaking hands, and floats to Bellinora’s outstretched ones. Taking the tattered blanket, she looks at it for a moment, then *clutching* it to her heart, she closes her eyes and begins to cry. Not a soft cry, but a heart wrenching, *body* shaking cry.

Amanda is *completely* shocked and confused. She turns to look at Thian, Tianna and Tia, who look back to her just as shaken and confused as she is.

Bellinora looks to Amanda, and as she begins leaning forward to say something, Ellanya says in a commanding tone, “*Daughter!*” She says this with *such* force, it *startles* everyone, making them all jump with fright.

Bellinora stiffens, turns and looks at Ellanya with *pleading* in her eyes. Ellanya has a *very* stern expression, and Amanda catches Ellanya give the *slightest* shake of her head, within the waving green vapor.

After a long moment, Bellinora nods slowly, composes herself somewhat, and excuses herself from the room. Getting up, she walks to Amanda, who still has a *frightened* expression, and hands her back the blanket with a weak smile. Bellinora then leaves the room, with Jasmine trotting along by her side.

After Bellinora heads down one of the tunnels, Amanda looks to Ellanya and asks, “What’s *happened*? What’s *wrong*? Why did my *blanket* make her cry? I *don’t* understand what’s going on.”

Ellanya seems to think this over for a moment, then says softly, “There are many things which we have *no* right to explain at the present Amanda. Please *forgive* us our reactions, as you tell your story. Everything will become clear, at the *proper* time, and at the *proper* place. Please be patient. Bellinora will rejoin us soon.”

After about five minutes of very uncomfortable silence, the kids nibbling at their sandwiches, and taking long sips of the ice-cream filled drinks, too nervous and frightened to *really* eat, Bellinora and Jasmine reenter the room, and take their places.

"My *apologies*," Bellinora says calmly. "Amanda, please continue. Did you *stay* with the woman who found you?"

"No." Amanda then tells them about being placed into foster care, and how she had been moved several times from one foster parent to another, and how she had been abused.

She tells them of moving from a place called California, to a place called Africa, and about her time at the orphanage and how she had been treated there.

Bellinora would tear up from time to time, dabbing her eyes with a tissue, making everyone even more uncomfortable.

Amanda tells them how she had met her adopted parents, and had been *slapped* across the face once they had gotten her in the car, to take her to her new home. How she was *only* adopted to watch their little boy, *Larry*, who was mean, just like her new mom and dad, who would *hit* her often, and hard. She recounts how her new parents then moved back to the United States, and back to California, then later moved to a place called Maricopa in Arizona. Then, she continued, how sometime later, her dad was transferred back to his old place of work, in California.

Soon, she tells how she and her family, along with their neighbors, arrived at a campsite in the mountains. Amanda tells them how her mom had *backhanded* her across the mouth, and what her mom and dad said to her - how she was to *stay* in her tent, while everyone else left to go to town. Then how she had gotten mad and decided that since she was *not* a little kid anymore, she would go on an *adventure* of her own, and just walk up the mountain for half an hour, then back down.

"When I stepped out of the tent, it *was* a little overcast, but not too bad. But once I got *up* the mountain a good ways, the skies turned *really* dark... like within just a few *minutes*! It started to rain, then rained *harder* than I've ever experienced. And the thunder and *lightning*! Oh my *gosh*... it was *incredible*!

"The *lightning* flashed every few seconds, and even though I wanted to be going back *down* the mountain, well...." Amanda says shaking her head.

"Well... *what* Amanda?" Ellanya asks intently focused on Amanda's face.

"Well, it just seemed that every time I started *down*, something would *happen*. Like, the *lightning* would strike a *tree* setting it on fire, and I'd have to go some other way back *up* the mountain to get away from it. Or, the lightning would strike the *ground* close by. I'd get *scared*, and I'd run away from it... back *up* the mountain. *One* strike even hit the ground and blew a *hole* in it. It sent *rocks* and dirt flying *everywhere*. One *chunk*, hit me really *hard* in the back. It *scared* me and I started running further *up* the mountain. Another strike, when I tried to go to the *right*, struck a tree right in *front* of me, and *blew* the *top* off, then split the tree *almost* in half. A second later, a *huge* flaming limb from the tree crashed down *right* beside me. A couple more inches and it would have *killed* me for sure!"

Bellinora and Ellanya are looking intently at Amanda, as are the others. Anastasia, Cassandra and Sadie are *literally* on the edge of their seats, hearing all this for the first time.

Amanda continues her story, telling them how a *huge* bear had been scared witless by the *thunder* and lightning, and how it had come *charging* into the small clearing she was standing in. How the bear had *flipped* off its feet, landing on its side and came spinning right at her. How its giant *claws* had just missed her leg, and how the huge gaping mouth, *lined* with razor sharp teeth tried to *bite* her. How she had watched the bear slam into a tree, rise to its feet and stagger to

within a few feet of her. She told them how the lightning and *thunder* had hit at the *same* moment she had screamed and threw her arms up to defend herself, and how the bear ran off into the forest in *one* direction, while she ran *frantically* into the forest in another.

All eyes are glued to Amanda as she becomes more *animated* with the telling. She tells them how she continued *up* the mountain, and how when she went to the *right*, something would always happen and force her, not only to the *left*, but further *up* the mountain.

Bellinora and Ellanya occasionally stop Amanda as they begin quickly, and at times animatedly, to speak in a *strange* language Amanda cannot understand, no matter *how* hard she concentrates. After a time, they ask her to continue.

Amanda tells them how she had rounded a sharp ridge and grabbed onto a root sticking out from some rocks, then how a rock had fallen away once she put her *full* weight on the root, causing the long root to drop down several feet. Then how she had swung out wide over the ravine on the other side, leaving her *dangling* in the air and how the root first shattered, then broke apart, sending her *falling* into the ravine on the other side, right into a rapidly flowing *slurry* of mud. How the mud slide took her quickly down the mountain on her face, back, and then how she had been turned sideways, and was rolled like a *pipe* on the floor.

She describes how she had been cut, *slashed*, battered and bruised by sharp rocks and *sticks* as she slid, and about a *chunk* of her hair *yanked* out by the roots, and that a *huge* chunk of skin on her left knee was *ripped* off. And how she thought she just could not *take* any more, and then *somehow*, the sliding stopped when she *slammed* into a huge boulder, and how the water was flowing very quickly on *one* side of the boulder, and *not* on the other.

Bellinora and Ellanya stop her here, and have another brief discussion.

“Amanda? Did the flow of water *again* force you to the... *left*? When looking *up* the mountain that is?” Ellanya asks.

Thinking for a moment, Amanda nods. “Yeah. Then, after I rested for a while, I started to walk away... or, well, *limping* really. I *still* couldn’t believe it was raining so *hard*, and the *lightning* just kept striking below and *around* me. I had only walked a little way, when I heard a loud rumbling. I looked up the mountain and... it was an *avalanche*!” getting gasps from the others.

Amanda tells everyone of being *buried* beneath a huge boulder, where a tree had been torn away. How another boulder, *somehow*, had struck the one trapping her, opening up her hole again. And how later, another *huge* boulder thumped over the hole, *trapping* her inside, this time... no other boulder came to knock it free. She tells them how she had *just* managed to dig her way out, before becoming exhausted, and *drowning*.

Continuing, she tells them about the *huge* piles of rocks and torn up trees blocking her way *down* the mountain, once she was out of the hole. How, as she was *trying* to think of what to do next to get down the mountain, *lightning* struck some trees a little way down the mountainside and set them on *fire*. And then how, in another few seconds, *another* bolt struck a tree, *splitting* it in half, causing *another* fire. How it was *really* weird when the two fires swirled *higher* and higher, and how she thought it *strange* there was so *much* fire, for so *little* wood to burn, and how *odd* it was that the fires stayed *lit* in all the downpour.

She then told them how the two fires began *circling* around one another, and then merged into one huge *fire-tornado*, which seemed to *chase* her. So, she *once* again found that she was forced to go *up* and to the left.

Bellinora and Ellanya stop her again here, and along with Jasmine, have a fairly long discussion. Sometime later, Bellinora nods for Amanda to continue.

After taking a few sips of her drink, Amanda begins again. “As I was rounding a boulder way up the mountain, I *tripped* and fell forward. I had been looking *up* the mountain, because I *thought* I heard another rock slide. As I started falling, I put my hands out to break my fall, but fell *right* off a cliff and did a complete *flip* in the air. I saw a pool of water *waaay* below me, and I *knew* I’d die when I hit it - it was *really* a long way down! But then, as I completed another flip, there was a *tree* sticking out from the cliff face, and I *slammed* into it, the limbs, *branches* and stuff, really *tore* me up good. I thought I might be *beaten* to death, as I fell from limb to limb.

“I remember hitting a huge limb *flat* on my stomach. It knocked *most* of the wind out of me too. I remember, laying there, *draped* over that limb for a long time, then sliding off of it, and falling through *more* branches, then out of the tree. I fell some more, and was picking up speed, when I hit a *second* tree I hadn’t seen...”

Bellinora and Ellanya exchange looks, then Bellinora looks at Jasmine for a moment, before nodding to Amanda to continue.

“Well, I hit *that* tree hard too, got pretty beat up, then my *backpack* was torn from my back. I was spun into the air away from the tree, and I fell a good distance and *hit* the really cold pool of water. I couldn’t *swim* then. Thian, Tianna and Tia taught me how later. But, anyway...”

Amanda tells them how she had *somehow* managed to get to the shore, *find* a cave opening which looked like a boulder had *just* fallen from the hole, and what the boulder looked like. She tells them how she had spent the night in the cave tunnel, and then *found* her backpack floating in the pool of water in the morning.

“You know, it was *really* weird how the lightning, or *something* else, kept forcing me *up* the mountain, and *always* to the left,” Amanda says with a laugh. “Heck, if it *hadn’t*, I’d never have fallen off that *cliff*. And if it hadn’t been for those two *trees* and the pool... I would have *died*.”

“Amanda, it was *not* by coincidence these things happened to you - but by *design*.” Bellinora says softly. “I am not sure *who* placed the spells on the mountain, but it appears there may have been *two* sets of them, though I am only guessing of course.

“*One* set of spells, I believe, were set to *kill* you, another set, much *stronger* ones, thankfully, to *save* you and *lead* you to that cave opening.”

For a moment, everyone sits and stares at Bellinora in disbelief.

“Amanda, I *cannot* explain everything now,” Bellinora says leaning back in her chair. “But really, *think* about it. The sky just *happened* to turn into the most *violent* storm you have ever *heard* of? *Lightning* was striking *repeatedly*... only near *you*? Think for a moment. Think *hard*. Did you *ever* see any lightning strike anywhere *else* on the mountain, other than close by *you*?”

Amanda thinks for a moment, then with a puzzled expression says, “No, now that I *think* on it. It was just always close to me.”

“Do you not think all those *other* things that happened to you, were just a bit... *odd*? I mean, do you *really* think all those things could happen to *one* person, and that person could *survive*?”

“Well, I...” Amanda says looking confused.

“Amanda,” Bellinora says with a smile. “Do you not think it *very* strange, that those two fires you saw, the ones that turned into a *fire-tornado*, managed to stay *ablaze*... in a *complete* downpour?”

“Ummm...”

“Think for a moment,” Bellinora continues. “You said that the lightning struck *two* trees some distance apart, setting them on *fire* and that the two burning areas began to... *circle* one another. *How*? How did the fire move *away* from its source of fuel? How did they stay in *flames* with all that rain? How did they... *merge* and create a *fire-tornado*... again... in a *downpour*? You

then say the huge fire-tornado began *advancing* toward you. Again, I ask, *how*? What was it *using* as fuel?"

Amanda is completely *stunned*, thinking back, realizing that the huge fire-tornado *had* actually been coming toward her, but over *nothing* but rushing mud.

"And this is *very* important Amanda," Ellanya says looking intently to Amanda. "When you fell off the cliff into the two trees, did you *see* them when you first began to fall?"

"Well, *yeah*. I mean, I *hit* them you know. I'm not *lying*."

"We *know* you are not lying Amanda. We believe *everything* you have told us. But think *very* carefully. As you *first* fell from the edge of the cliff... and you began to turn over... *what* did you see?"

Amanda has an intense look of concentration on her face, then finally says, "Uh... actually, the only thing I really *remember* seeing... was the pool of *water* far below me. But, *that* couldn't be right. I mean, I *did* hit the trees."

"When you saw the *first* tree," Bellinora asks with a smile, "did you see the *second* one too?"

"No... I was a little *busy* getting *smacked* around in the first one."

The kids laugh.

"As you flipped out of the first tree, what did you see?" Ellanya asks narrowing her eyes in the vapor.

"The *second* tree. Coming up quickly from below me. *Why*?"

"Amanda, *think*!" Bellinora says evenly. "Do not just *say* what you *think* happened. Think back, *hard*. Replay the *whole* thing in your mind, what you actually saw at the *instant* you left the first tree."

Furrowing her eyebrows and biting her lower lip, Amanda's eyes shift from side to side as she concentrates. After a moment, her eyes go slightly wide as she says, "Oh my *gosh*! When I flipped out of the first tree, I *know* I only saw the pool of *water* far below me! But, then, all of the *sudden*, as I completed another flip, I saw *another* tree coming up fast, and then I hit *it*. *How*? I mean..."

"Amanda," Ellanya says looking as though she is nodding to herself. "You did not see the trees when you first flipped off the cliff... because they were *not* there. You were *driven* up the mountain, and to the *left*, and then *forced* off that cliff.

"When you began to fall, you triggered some kind of *proximity* spell. The *first* tree then appeared, *adjusted* its location to match your rate of fall, and to slow your descent. Otherwise, you *are* correct, you would have *died* on impact when you struck the pool of water.

"The *second* tree, did not appear until you fell from the first. The *proximity* of your falling body, within the spell cast within the chasm, triggered the *second* tree to appear, adjusting *its* location to match your rate of fall. As you think back, you will realize that the *two* trees were *precisely* spaced apart from one another, and the *last* tree spaced just right to the pool of water, to *slow* your descent, and *ensure* you would not be killed."

Amanda's eyes go wide and her jaw drops, as she remembers thinking the exact same thing. Turning to look at Thian, Tia and Tianna, she sees they are wide eyed as well, *each* having wondered *how* Amanda had been so lucky to have had the trees there, and *spaced* as they were... along with a pool of *water* to land in, instead of *solid* rock.

"And as for the pool of water," Bellinora says with a smile, "am I correct that you saw but *one* way to go, leading you out of the water and *onto* the shore? Which just *happened*... to be the *only* way you could find, which led you to the... *cave* opening? Where you just *happened* to find

a boulder... which had conveniently *just* fallen from the hole? And, that there was absolutely *no* possible way you could *ever* have climbed out of that area into which you had fallen?"

Amanda again looks quickly to her friends, who already knew the story. She turns back to Bellinora with a stunned expression asking, "Yeah, but... how did *you* know?"

"I have *no* clue as to who set the spells. But for some reason, *you* were detected on that mountain, and driven *up* its face, by some old spell or *spells*, with your *every* movement being controlled, to lead you to the *opening* in the cliff, which you have just revealed to us. If you would *not* have fallen by accident from the cliff Amanda, *something* would have happened which would have *forced* you to fall over the side.

"Oh, and skipping *back* for a moment, to when that huge, *lone* boulder thumped over your hole. Don't you think it the *least* bit odd, that a *single*, huge boulder, which could have been tumbling *anywhere* across the very wide swatch of the avalanche, just, *happened* to roll right to where *you* were? Having rolled across the already *heavily* rock and tree strewn mountainside, and did not *stop* before reaching *you*? And, that it just *happened* to be the right size to cover your hole?

"That was *not* by coincidence Amanda. That boulder was *directed* by some spell to find and kill... *you*! We believe that some *other* spell, created the hole for you earlier, to get you into and keep you from being crushed. Since you said one boulder had *changed* direction slightly, *struck* you rather gently for a massive boulder, *tossing* you into the hole *just* prior to being *crushed* to death. We believe, that some spell *detected* that you had survived, and had sent this *last* huge boulder to find you, *crush* you, and come to rest over you, *hiding* your body from *ever* being found."

The color has drained from Amanda face, as well as from the other kids.

Bellinora then smiles and says, "Please, continue with your story. What happened next?"

Trembling and confused, Amanda continues. She tells them of finding the various caverns she had fallen into. How, at *one* point, she was walking along a narrow ridge to get to some *purple* crystals, when the ledge she was standing on *broke*, sending her *tumbling* down an embankment. How she had bounced off several boulders and the cave walls, and had eventually come to a *huge* cavern with a *glowing* green lake, and all the wonderful *gleaming* crystals.

Amanda now knows, she had *not* accidently fallen into those caverns, which forced her further and *further* into the mountain - but she had been *made* to fall. Even the ledge she had walked out on, which gave away, had all been some sort of *pre-planned* spell.

But for *who*, or *why*, she has no idea.

Amanda continues to tell everyone how she had followed the lake to the *left*, to see what she could find, and about the amazing crystals, *stalactites* and stalagmites she had found. And how the water was so *crystal* clear, she could see all the waving reeds and *fish* in the lake.

"Again, it seems some *spell* was cast upon the lake, to make it *emit* light. Interesting," Ellanya says thoughtfully.

"I thought it was probably just some kind of glowing *algae* or something," Amanda says looking surprised.

"No Amanda. Algae would not emit that *much* light. And since you say the water was *crystal* clear... it was *not* algae making the lake glow, but a *very* strong luminos-*aquate* spell. What did you find as you went around the lake?"

"Well, I was walking around a *huge* stalagmite, when I saw a *skeleton*," Amanda says and hears Sadie gasp. Amanda looks over and sees Sadie's *wide* eyes as she is clinging tightly to Tianna.

“A *skeleton*?” Ellanya asks turning slightly to Bellinora. “What did it look like?”

“Like, well... like a *skeleton* I guess,” Amanda says, not exactly sure what Ellanya meant. “I mean, I’ve only seen skeletons in *books* and movies. I’d never seen one in *person* before.”

“How was it *positioned*? Was there any type of *clothing*, or anything lying about near it?” Bellinora asks leaning forward a little.

“Oh, yeah. Well, it was lying *face* down. Its head facing in the direction I was coming from. *That’s* where I found the *necklace*, the key and the... *big* book.”

“The... the *Artifact* was still on the *skeleton* Amanda? And a *key* you say... and... a *book*? *What* book?” Ellanya asks.

“I’ll get there in a minute. I don’t want to *forget* anything though. Uh, let’s see. Oh yeah, I saw something *shiny* just a little way from the skeleton. I walked over, and saw that *whatever* it was, was covered with fallen rocks. As I moved the rocks away, I *cut* my left index finger.

“When I got the rocks moved away, I found that it was a *broken* sword. I picked it up and tried to wipe off some *dark* stuff that was on the blade, using the *blood* from my finger that had smeared on it. *Some* of the gunk came off, but I didn’t see any writing or anything. So, I put it down and went back to the skeleton.

“The head had separated from the spine a little, and the *necklace* was pretty well buried in dirt between the two. I could only see just a small portion of the *chain* sticking up out of the dirt. It looked like a gold chain.

“The skeleton was *still* holding onto the old leather book. It had its *fingers* curled over the end of it. I thought that the book might have their *name* or address in it or something. I had to pull the book out from under the skeletons bony hand... it was *really* creepy. When the book came free, the hand and arm *fell* to the ground. The hand actually *broke* away from the arm at the wrist. I *swear*, it was like the skeleton really didn’t *wanna* let go of that book.”

Bellinora and Ellanya talk briefly between themselves in the strange language Amanda cannot understand, with Jasmine chiming in on occasion. Cassandra and Anastasia have their heads together and are whispering excitedly between themselves.

“Please continue Amanda,” Bellinora says with a nod.

“Well, before I left, I decided to pick up the old *key* too. I’ve got the key and the *book* here too, in my backpack.”

Amanda reaches into a side pocket of her backpack and retrieves the ancient key. She looks at it for a moment, as an image flashes in her mind, of when she first found it. The image is strikingly clear.

As Amanda holds the key out, Bellinora waves her hand and the key leaps from Amanda’s hand and floats quickly to Bellinora. Bellinora turns slightly to Ellanya, and the two of them chat for a couple minutes, intently studying the *carving* on the key. Bellinora shows it to Jasmine, who looks it over carefully then nods. Bellinora waves her open hand over the key and it floats back to Amanda, who catches it, then returns it to her pack.

Bellinora then says, “The *key* you found, Amanda, is of a *very* ancient type. It was used by ones called the *Protectors*. Many doors *may* be opened by speaking various Wizitch words or phrases. *Some* however, actually require a *very* special key. The ancient script on the key you found, indicates that it is *indeed* one used by the Protectors.”

Before Amanda has a chance to ask who the Protectors were, or just *what* it was that they were protecting, Ellanya asks curiously, “What is this *book* you speak of?”

Tianna nudges Thian whispering, “*This* should be interesting.” Thian smiles back, and Tia, who overheard, smiles and nods.

“Oh, it’s a really *thick* book that looks *ancient*.” Amanda flips up the large portion of her pack, reaches in with both hands, and pulls out the large, *thick* leather book. She is holding it at a slight angle, so neither Ellanya, Jasmine nor Bellinora can see the cover or back clearly.

As Amanda holds it out, Bellinora waves her hand and the book begins to cross over to her. Bellinora makes a slight rotation of her wrist, and the book turns around and up so the *cover* faces her, Ellanya and Jasmine.

Bellinora and Ellanya *both* let out a cry of surprise, and the book falls with a loud *thud* to the floor. Jasmine *springs* from her pedestal, and as before, *shoots* across the cavern and down the nearby tunnel and out of sight.

Anastasia and Cassandra are *instantly* on their feet, clutching each other tightly, staring at the book on the floor, as though it may *strike* out at them like a snake at any moment. Sadie has pulled her feet up and is tightly *curled* against Tianna, clinging to her arm while shaking.

“By the Lord and *Lady*,” Ellanya says, her vapor still settling. “Could that *really* be....?”

“*The Lost Book Of The Dillian’s?*” Bellinora asks, reaching down with trembling hands to pick up the ancient book. “It would *fit* actually. The *Necklace of Power*... the *Protectors* key.

“Yes, the wearer of the necklace, the *Wielder of Power*, would *indeed* want the knowledge within this book. The only thing missing mother, to make the *Wielder of Power* complete, would be the *Great Book of Power*. But to obtain it, one would need the *Thirteen Shards of Legend*. And we know that *no* one has all of them.”

Bellinora studies the front cover of the book very carefully, as does Ellanya. They look closely at the gold clasp, along with its intricate engraving. A *perfect* emerald is set into the clasp. After studying the clasp and the writing on the face of the book, Bellinora turns it so she and Ellanya can see the writing along the spine.

Bellinora flips the book over to view the back. Both *gasp* and begin chatting excitedly. No matter how *hard* Amanda concentrates on the language they are speaking, she cannot understand a *single* word. But she *can* tell by their expressions, that this is a *very* important book. She also knows they are talking about the *beautifully* embossed impression of the large gold *dragon*, and the strange symbol above it.

Jasmine comes trotting into the room, with something floating right behind her. Amanda looks in surprise, as she sees that it is a thin book, only about five by seven inches. The size reminds her of a rather *flat* novel.

Jasmine jumps up on her pedestal, with the book floating up beside her, where Bellinora reaches over, taking it while saying, “Thank you Jasmine... *now*, we will know.”

Bellinora flips the cover open on the small book, and holds it up for Jasmine to take a look at. In a moment, Jasmine gives a short mew, then Bellinora shows the page to Ellanya. Ellanya looks it over, and nods.

Flipping to a page in the large book, then to a page in the smaller one, Bellinora would show the pages first to Jasmine, then to Ellanya, each looking as though comparing the two pages. After they would comment, Bellinora would move on to another page.

After several minutes passed, Bellinora closes the small book, placing it on Jasmine’s pedestal, with the large book resting in her lap.

“Amanda, you *have* indeed found *The Lost Book Of The Dillian’s*,” Bellinora says with confidence.

“Excuse me,” Anastasia says timidly. “I’ve read a lot, and the *name* is kind of familiar, but... I don’t *really* remember much about a lost book by someone named Dillian.”

“Oh, that is *not* surprising dear,” Ellanya says with a smile. “It is said, that the Dillians are in legend, perhaps, the most *evil* family of *witches* and wizards who ever *lived*. There have been *many* stories about them, dating back to almost the very *beginning* of time.”

“Most people today, believe that those stories are simply *myth*,” Bellinora says, scratching Jasmine’s head. “But it has been found that, *most* myths are *born* from legend, legend of course, being some *popular* story, regarded as historical, but one which is *unable* to be authenticated. Many a legend, is born from *reality*. Over the millennia, the *truth* seems to get buried somewhere *deep* within the telling.”

“It is said, that the Dillians created the *majority* of the most evil spells, potions and *curses* ever known to Wizitch kind,” Ellanya says looking at the old book. “And, that they put some of the *worst* of that knowledge into a *single* book. That book has been *missing* now for many millennia, ever since *The Great War*.”

“The *original* book, may actually *no* longer exist, but it *has* been rumored that the original book *had* again been found, and that it had been *translated* from the ancient language, into that of common elf of the time, which would *still* be very ancient in regards to our *current* era. If that were *true*, that ancient language would actually be *very* similar to what is spoken in many areas, of *many* realms, even today.”

“Therefore, whoever possessed this *new* book, would hold in *their* hands, some of the most *evil* spells and curses *ever* devised. Not *nearly* as horrific as those within the *Great Book Of Power* of course, but, certainly *many* spells and curses no *other* living being would possess. The book is said to be *filled* with the *foulest* of deeds, and even descriptions of what happened to those they used the *spells* and curses on, while *perfecting* them.”

“But, the book was rumored to have been taken to some other realm, many *tens* of thousands of years ago. But no one knew *where*, or even *if* the book had actually *really* been found at all,” Bellinora says looking at the book resting in her lap.

“And, you think *this*... is the *same* book then?” Anastasia asks looking from Ellanya to Bellinora.

“No dear,” Ellanya says evenly giving a slight shake of her head. “We *don’t* think this is the same book. We *know* it is! We have just *authenticated* it. You see, many thousands of years ago, my...”

“*Someone* who once saw the book, and was able to make detailed *drawings* of it,” Bellinora cut in quickly, “was able to make *copies* of many of the pages within the book. That book of the copies, is what *Jasmine* brought us, and is what we used to *authenticate* that this book,” Bellinora glances to the ancient book in her lap, then back to the kids, “*is* indeed, *The Lost Book Of The Dillian’s*.”

“Amanda, I must ask that you *surrender* this book to us. It needs to be *destroyed*. It must *never* fall into the hands of the *Dark* side of Wizitch. Do you understand?”

“*What?!*” Cassandra shouts leaning forward. “Are you *crazy*? That book is worth a *fortune*! We could all be *rich*! Let’s just... *sell* the stupid thing.”

Everyone looks at Cassandra with *scowls* on their faces, and when Cassandra looks at Bellinora and Ellanya, their *piercing* eyes make her blood run cold. She looks down at her hands, mumbling, “I was just *saying*...”

“Amanda,” Bellinora says calmly, “since you *are* the one who found the book, I would like to know *your* decision.”

Amanda hesitates for a moment, then says, “Yeah, okay. You can have it. I don’t *really* need it anymore *now* anyway.”

Bellinora looks intently at Amanda. Something in Amanda's *tone* bothers her. She asks, "Amanda... what do you mean you, 'don't really *need* it anymore... *now*?' Did you... *read* any of this book?"

Amanda flushes, then turns nervously to look to Thian, Tia and Tianna. They look as uneasy as she does.

Turning back to Bellinora, Amanda answers, "Um... *yeah*, actually, I *did*."

"How *much* did you read?" Ellanya asks nervously.

Amanda swallows hard, then says in a quiet voice, "Actually, I've *memorized* the entire thing."

Both Bellinora and Ellanya gasp as they turn to look at one another with *very* worried expressions. Bellinora grabs the small book from Jasmine's pedestal. Jasmine *springs* to her feet, and is staring intently at Amanda along with everyone else.

Flipping the little book open, Bellinora says, "What does the *fifth* paragraph, on what in the large book would be page *thirty-seven* say?"

"Use a *three-quarter, counterclockwise* forward thrust, keeping your arm straight, but not *locked* at the elbow."

The *eyes* on both Bellinora and Ellanya fly wide. Jasmine seems to *choke* on a fur ball. Bellinora tests Amanda on several other sections of the book, then closes it, with a very *concerned* expression, placing the little book back on Jasmine's pedestal. Jasmine stares at the book for a moment, then locks her eyes on Amanda.

"So... *how* do you think you managed to memorize *every* page, of a book that is over *four* inches thick?" Ellanya asks curiously.

"I... I don't *know* really. I *guess* I thought that, since I had read it *every* day for a couple of months, that... I just *memorized* it."

Amanda looks at the expressions on Bellinora and Ellanya, then says softly, "But... it *didn't* happen like that... *did* it?"

"No dear," Ellanya says sadly. "That book and the *Artifact* you wear, are of the *same* bloodline. The *Artifact* already *knows* everything in this book, and most *everything* within the *Great Book of Power*."

"However, *you*, as the *Wielder*, do *not* possess the knowledge to *fully* call upon the powers of the *Artifact*... *yet*. You would need to read, *understand* and practice *all* within the *Great Book of Power*, to know how to *call* upon, *control* and *wield* the greater powers within the *Artifact*."

"But even the knowledge you *now* possess, is *far* beyond the dreams of even the most *powerful* wizard or witch. Only the most *powerful*... and most *evil* witch, wizard or other creature... would even *begin* to possess the *ability* to control the immense powers, *trapped* within that *Artifact*."

"This is *most* troubling. I have *no* idea, as to how *you*... a mere *child*... could *possibly* have been accepted by the *Artifact*, as the *Wielder of Power*. It was *never* intended for someone so young, *or* for someone with *little* or no training. I think we need to hear *more* of your story dear. I believe, *somewhere* in your tale, we will come upon a *demonstration* of your use of the *Artifact* thus far, whether you *realized* it at the time or not. And perhaps, *even* a demonstration of what you have read from *within* this very book. Please, continue with your story. I would like to know *everything* that you saw, *did*, felt, *thought*, and so forth, from the *moment* you first saw the skeleton. Please try to leave *nothing* out, every *sight*, sound, *smell*... *anything* you can recall."

"Well, I've told you *most* of it. But, when I was going to get up - actually, *just* before I went to get the key - I saw the little part of the gold chain from the necklace. I really *wanted* to leave,

but... I just *couldn't* seem to stand. I know it sounds *silly*, but, it was like the chain wasn't going to *let* me leave, until I *pulled* it out of the ground."

Bellinora, Jasmine and Ellanya exchange knowing looks.

"*That's* when I reached down and *pulled* it out of the dirt."

"It was *that* easy? It just came *right* up into your hands?" Ellanya asks with a suspicious tone.

"Well... not *really*. I mean, first, I grabbed it with my *right* hand and tried to pull it up. It wouldn't come out. So, I tugged *really* hard again. But it didn't even *budge*. I grabbed it with *both* hands, and *this* time, when I tugged *really* hard, it just *flew* out of the ground, with no effort at all. I even landed on my *butt*!"

Bellinora, Jasmine and Ellanya engage in an excited conversation. Amanda watches in wonder, as Jasmine mumbles away in some kind of rapid *cat* speak, with Bellinora and Ellanya listening intently. After a few moments of Bellinora and Ellanya appearing to be in a *heated* discussion, Jasmine makes a *loud* mew, whereupon Bellinora and Ellanya turn to look at her.

Jasmine makes some odd *mumbling* mewing sounds for a few moments, then proceeds to clean her paw. The *look* on Jasmine's face, seems to Amanda, as though Jasmine has just *settled* the entire argument.

"By the Lord and *Lady*," Bellinora says softly. "I think Jasmine's *right*! The necklace would *not* come free, because it *sensed* that Amanda was not only a *child*, but that she was not the *least* bit evil... but *did* sense *something*. However, as Jasmine just mentioned, when Amanda reached down with her *left* hand, the one she had *injured* on the broken sword, she *smear*ed the chain with *her* blood."

"So... what does *that* mean?" Amanda asks with a look of confusion.

"That *stain* you tried to wipe off of the broken blade, with the *blood* from your finger Amanda," Ellanya says now nodding to herself, "was *dried* blood. Whatever kind of blood that was on that blade, was now not only *smear*ed over your finger, but had *entered* into your bloodstream.

"*Jasmine* thinks that the necklace could then sense the *evil* in the blood that was smear

ed over the chain, from whatever *blood* was on your finger. That is, from *your* own blood, and that mixed with the now *dissolved* blood on the blade. That *fooled* the necklace into thinking you *were* evil - at least to *some* degree. Yes... it is the *only* thing that seems to makes *sense*!"

"Amanda, please continue," Bellinora says nodding as well. "What *happened* once the necklace was *in* your hands?"

"Well, after I got up, I took the necklace, *key* and the old book to the lake. I set the stuff down and then *washed* off the necklace, and, well, when I *did*..."

"What? Did something happen when the necklace... *touched* the glowing water perhaps?" Bellinora asks leaning forward.

"It may be *nothing* really," Amanda says softly with a slight smile, "again, it seems *silly*, but since you said to tell you *everything* I saw and stuff... when I dipped the necklace into the water, I could have *sworn* it actually... *glowed* - like it was giving off its *own* light or something."

The eyes on Bellinora, Ellanya, and Jasmine grow wide. Ellanya turns to Bellinora and Jasmine and says softly, "The Oriä Tá Eliañtörs? But... *that* would mean..."

"That whoever the *Wielder of Power* was," Bellinora says seriously, "*knew* they were dying, and cast the *spell* upon the lake." Then slowly shaking her head, "I have to admit mother, I *did* not see this one coming. Mother, this is *not* good at all."

"What's wrong?" Thian asks looking worried. "What's the Oriä Tá Eliañtörs? I've never *heard* of it."

“The Oriä Tá Eliañtörs,” Ellanya begins, “is from the most *ancient* of languages. It refers to a very ancient, *immensely* powerful spell. There is no *direct* translation to modern languages, but roughly, it means, ‘awaken the *spirits* within.’

“The *Wielder of Power* knew that someday, someone *worthy* would come along and find the *Artifact*. But, as far as we know, the *Great Book of Power* had not been *fully* completed at the time of this wearer’s demise. And, of course, the *Great Book of Power* has been *lost* now for many centuries, as has any word of the *Wielder*. So whoever this was wearing the *Artifact*, was still not *powerful* enough to call upon the *full* powers of the spirits trapped within the gems. That *is* of course, why there is *still* the Light side of *Wizitch*. They did not possess the full power of the *Artifact*. However...”

“They *did* have great powers.” Bellinora continues, “*Far* beyond the greatest wizard or witch, and all *other* *Wizitch* beings for that matter, almost as great as the mighty *Keptic*.”

They all turn to look at Sadie, who shrinks down curling tightly against Tianna.

“Generally, it has been said, but no one *knows* for sure, that once a *Wielder of Power* dies, the power within the necklace goes *dormant*. For it has become an actual *part* of the *Wielder*. However, the *Wielder* may die, but, it is more like the *spirits* within the necklace go to sleep. It has even been rumored, that the *soul* of the *Wielder*, is *absorbed* by the necklace, and they themselves, become one of the *trapped* spirits. So, *all* the spirits should be asleep.

“Well, all but *one*, or so it is said. That spirit, called the ‘*watcher*’, waits for someone to find the necklace, and sits in *judgment* as to whether they be *worthy* to wield the great powers, or not.”

“Whosoever finds the *Artifact*, is *tested* for worthiness, through their *bloodline*,” Ellanya says swirling in her vapor. “or, more *accurately*, through the *evil* in their blood. The ceremony requires the *potential* *Wielder*, to *cut* themselves, then *smear* some of their blood upon the *Artifact*, so the watcher may *sense* the evil within them.

“If they *pass* the test to determine that they are *truly* of evil blood, and are *accepted* by the *Artifact*, they may *then* pick it up and place it around their neck - that *one* act, *forever* making the bond between them.

“From that moment on, the *Wielder* would be *very* hard to kill, but not *impossible* at first, until they have *awakened* many more spirits, whereupon, *those* spirits will do *everything* in their power, to *protect* the *Wielder*. And the *Wielder* had *better* be able to control them. At that point, there are no known *poisons*, potions, spells or *curses* which can *touch* the *Wielder*. The *Artifact* will protect them, and *do* the *Wielders* bidding, until the *Wielder* *dies* of natural causes, or, at least that is the *story* anyway. Again, no one *knows* for sure.”

“So you see,” Bellinora says looking at the necklace, “once the necklace *accepts* the new *Wielder*, they may then, *very* carefully, awaken just a *few* more spirits at a time. They must learn to *control* the powers of these few, very *powerful* trapped spirits, *before* awakening any others. Once *all* spirits are awakened, which could take fifty to *one-hundred* years or more, dependent upon the *Wielder*, the *Wielder* would be ready for the *complete* dominance of *all* the realms. This however, may *only* happen when the *Wielder* obtains the *full* knowledge within the *Great Book of Power*, which will tell them how to... *combine*... all the *evil*, within all the trapped spirits... into *one*, immense, *all* powerful spirit.”

“Yes, and with *that* power,” Ellanya says sadly, “*all* will be lost. All those practicing the *Light* side of *Wizitch*, will be hunted and *exterminated*. The *Wielder of Power* will amass *fearsome* armies of the *Dark* forces, the likes of which can only be *imagined* in the darkest of nightmares. They will move throughout the realms, and with the power of the *Artifact*...

*completely* take them over, one realm at a time, until only the *foulest* evil exists throughout *all* the realms, of *all* the known universes.

“The thoughts and *deeds* within the darkness of evil... will *forever* snuff out that of the Light, and *darkness* will reign throughout all eternity. There would be *no* turning back. The *Artifact* will continue to take over the Wielder, filling them with *more* and more evil, until they are no longer of their *own* mind or will, but have truly become the *totality* of the evil within the *Artifact*. They will become the *darkest* of the Dark, *never* to return to themselves.”

The kids are *terrified*, all looking to Amanda who looks totally horrified.

Amanda cries, “Please! I don’t *want* it! Take it *off*! Please! *Help* me... *do* something!”

All the kids begin to cry and look frantic, as they plead for Bellinora and Ellanya to take the necklace off of Amanda - even Cassandra.

Bellinora holds her hands up and says firmly, “*Silence!* Once the new *Wielder of Power* has been chosen, and the necklace is *around* their neck... *nothing* short of their *death* may remove it, other than...” Bellinora looks to Ellanya who shakes her head slightly.

Bellinora turns back to Amanda. “Well, we will discuss *that* at a later time. Amanda, you *have* been tested, *and* accepted. But, there must be *more* to the story than *just* the blood from your left finger. However, the necklace is now a *part* of you... and *like* it or not, *you*... are the new *Wielder of Power*.”

In a panic, through her tears, Amanda screams, “But I’m *not* an evil person! Honest! I’m *not*! I don’t *want* this necklace! I want it *off*! *Pleeeese!*”

“We know you do dear,” Ellanya says softly. “One such as you, was *never* meant to wear such a *foul* thing, and I don’t believe the *creators* of the *Artifact*, ever foresaw such a thing even being *possible*.”

“Yeah... that’s what *Josh* and Sam said too,” Tia says sniffing as she wipes her eyes.

Steadying herself as best she can, trying to calm down, Amanda asks in a shaky voice, “But... what does all this have to do with my putting the necklace into the *water* of the lake, and, why did it *glow*?”

“Amanda,” Bellinora says taking a deep steadying breath. “When you *first* grabbed the necklace with your right hand, the watcher determined that you were *not* worthy, but *must* have... sensed *something*. I am thinking you may have had *just* a little of the smeared blood from your left hand on your *right*, from when you were wiping the broken blade. Not a *lot*, but enough to *confuse* the watcher. Otherwise... you’d be *dead*!”

Everyone gasps. Amanda looks to her friends with frightened eyes.

“You see, the watcher also insures that whosoever *finds* the necklace, should they *not* pass the test... would be *killed*. This is so they may not *take* and attempt to *destroy* the necklace, or *hide* it where it may never be found. When you *grabbed* the necklace with your left hand, which had not only *your* fresh blood... but that which had *mixed* with whatever *evil* blood, or *bloods* were on the broken sword...”

“It *sensed*, in a way, fresh *evil* blood,” Ellanya says looking to Jasmine, who tilts her head giving a short mew of agreement.

“Therefore, the necklace, for *whatever* the watchers reason at this point in your story, accepted that you at *least* be allowed to pick it up, and not *kill* you right then,” Bellinora continues. “Perhaps it thought you *may* take it to someone with greater power, and present it to them. There is *no* way to know at the moment,” Bellinora says sitting back in her chair. “Then the part I had *not* seen coming... you placed the necklace into the water of the lake. The Oriä Tá Eliañtörs *spell* took effect, and, well...”

There is a long moment of silence, as Bellinora first looks to Jasmine, who seems to nod, then Bellinora turns to Ellanya, who also gives a slight nod. Bellinora turns back to Amanda and continues, "That spell Amanda, awakened *all* the spirits of the necklace - *all* at the *same* time.

"We don't believe this spell was *ever* intended to be used by the creators. We think, that whoever the last *Wielder of Power* was, cast the Oriä Tá Eliañtörs spell to save fifty, a *hundred* years or more, of *slowly* awakening the spirits, for the *new* Wielder. *Whoever* became the new Wielder would have to *immediately* control *all* the spirits. We think the previous Wielder believed, that the *new* wearer would indeed by then, *possess* the *Great Book of Power*, have *read* it, *understood* it, and would be *able* to control all the spirits."

"But... I..." Amanda begins.

"This of course, was a *very* foolish thing to attempt," Ellanya says slowly shaking her head. "Of course, if it *worked*, the new Wielder, if they were *evil* enough, *powerful* enough, and had the *Great Book of Power*... *may* be able to control all the spirits enough to keep them in check. But as far as we *know*... the *Artifact* was *never* designed to work that way all at once.

"Of course, I am sure the *last* wearer though, did not really *care*... after all, *they* would be dead. And *whatever* happened after they were gone... *who* knows. You see Amanda, your dipping the *Artifact* into the lake, *awakened* all the spirits within the *Artifact*. You should *now* be able to call upon *enough* power, to destroy even the *greatest* of wizards, *witches* and others. Especially, since you *also* possess all the knowledge within *The Lost Book Of The Dillian's*, even *without* the *Great Book of Power*."

"Even with the power you *now* possess Amanda," Bellinora says seriously. "You could *easily* kill *everyone* in this room, merely with the *blink* of your eyes."

The kids all *gasp*. Anastasia and Cassandra *jump* from their couch and quickly move away from Amanda, clutching *tightly* to one another, as though Amanda will strike them *dead* at any second.

"No! I... I *wouldn't*! I'm a *good* person, I'm a *Christian*!" Amanda says jumping to her feet, frantically *yanking* on the necklace, trying to pull it up over her head. "Get it *off*! Get it *off* of me! I don't want to hurt *anybody*! I'm a *Christian*! I don't *want* to become evil... *Please* get it off!"

"Amanda! *Sit* down!" Bellinora commands in such a *stern* tone, Amanda actually *falls* back into her chair, covering her face in her hands as she *bursts* into tears.

With her chest rising and falling through *shuddering* breaths, Amanda pleads. "Please... *do* something. I'm *not* a bad person. I'm *not* evil. I, I don't *want* this... please... I don't *want* to turn into... one of *them*. *Help* me!"

"Amanda, *calm* yourself," Ellanya says softly. "There *may* be a way to help you. But first, we *must* hear the rest of your story. *Everything* up to when you actually met Bellinora. Every *detail* may be of the *greatest* importance. Take your time, and tell us *everything*."

"Anastasia, Cassandra, *please* take your seats. If Amanda had *wanted* to harm you, she would *already* have done so. Please... *sit*. It *is* interesting, that Amanda now wears the *Artifact*, which has *fully* been awakened. However, she is most certainly *not* evil. So, the question is... if *she* is not powerful enough to *control* the spirits... *why* have the spirits not...."

"Actually, I think it is time for a little *break*," Bellinora says with a warm smile, as she looks at Amanda's trembling body, tears still *streaming* down her face. "Perhaps you would all like to use the restroom, and freshen up a little? Let us give Amanda, a few *minutes* to regain her composure, and we will continue then. The women's restroom is down that corridor and to your right. Thian, the men's is on the left. Once everyone has freshened up, please take your seats."

“I would like to speak with Ellanya and Jasmine in my *office* for a few minutes. We will join you shortly.”

## Amanda Continues

[To TOC](#)

The kids slowly walk to the restrooms with Cassandra and Anastasia walking a little way behind the others, still looking at Amanda as though she is some kind of *monster*, who may be *possessed* and attack them at any moment.

Thian heads to the men's restroom, as Amanda, Tia, Tianna and Sadie head into the women's. Cassandra grabs Anastasia's arm just as they begin to enter and whispers, "Wait. We need to talk... *now!*" and the two of them head back into the other room.

As the girls take their stalls, no one says a thing. Everyone still *deep* in thought. Amanda flushes, exits the stall and goes to the wash basin. She runs cold water and washes her hands, and splashes water in her face several times, then dries off with a hand towel, which *materializes* from thin air. She stands in front of the wide mirror, looking at herself as though she does not recognize her own reflection.

"I'm *not* an evil person... I'm *not*," Amanda says softly to herself.

"We *know* you're not," comes a gentle voice from her right. Amanda turns her head to see Tia leaving her stall and walking toward the sinks.

"You *are* a little *weird* though..." comes Tianna's voice, trying to lighten things up, as she steps from her stall toward the sinks as well, just as Sadie comes out of hers. "but... for a *human*, we like you *anyway*," and laughs, making Amanda, Tia and Sadie laugh too.

"I'm really *scared* and confused too," Amanda says looking into the sink. "I don't understand *why* this all happened to *me*. Why did the necklace pick... *me*?"

"Maybe it just decided that, since it had been *dormant* and alone for so long, it would pick the *first* creature it found, just to get the *heck* out of that mountain," Tianna says lifting Sadie to the sink, so she can wash up. "I mean, wouldn't *you* wanna party some, after being *trapped* for who knows *how* long?" Lowering Sadie, Tianna starts doing a little dance with Sadie, making them all laugh, as Tianna says, "*Party, party, we all like to party.*"

"Yeah, I would," Amanda says, turning to look back at her reflection. "But, I don't think I'm going to like the *type* of party the spirits in the *necklace* have in mind. I just don't *get* it. If *all* the spirits are awake... why hasn't anything *happened*? I mean, they said the Wielder needed to learn to *control* only a *few* spirits at a time... however you do *that*."

"But did you see the *faces* on Bellinora and Ellanya, when they realized *all* the spirits were now awake, because of that... that *spell* in the lake?"

Tianna splashed some water in her face, and is drying off as she says, "Oh *yeah!* Eyes darn near *popped* out of their heads! Jasmine's eyes went *so* wide, I thought her *head* was going to explode! That's one *weird* puss."

They all laugh as they head out of the restroom.

Thian is waiting for them outside, leaning against the tunnel wall. "You okay Amanda?" he asks with concern.

"No... but I guess there's nothing I can *do* about it. I just want this thing *off* of me. But if I can't, I really need to know *how* to, well, how to *control* the... *spirits* inside it I guess. It really *creeps* me out, knowing there are *hundreds*, maybe even *thousands* of people, and other creature spirits *trapped* inside this thing."

"I know. It would creep *me* out too," Tia says softly, looking at the beautiful necklace.

"Well, *look* at it this way Amanda," Tianna says with a slight smile. "You'll *never* be alone, and now, you'll *always* have somebody to talk to *besides* yourself. But listen, they *did* say that

there *may* be a way to get it off, *remember*? They didn't look like they wanted to get *into* it yet though, I'm not sure why. But they did *hint* that there may be a way. I think they just need to hear the rest of the story first. Maybe there's something they're *looking* for. You know, like something *specific* that happened or something. Who knows?"

"Honestly... they seem to be as *confused* as we are. At least on *some* things... I think," Thian says seriously. "I *know* they know more than *we* know though... you *know*?"

"Speaking of *confusing*!" Tia laughs. "You *really* have a way with words Thian. Always *veeeery* clear as to what you mean."

"Oh... *thanks*," Thian says with a huge smile. Then as he thinks it over for a moment, he gets an odd expression on his face as his smile slowly slides away. "Hey... *wait*..."

Everyone laughs, then Thian laughs too.

"But, seriously," Thian continues. "I don't think they understand *exactly* what's going on either. But, let's get back and finish your story Amanda, then see what they think you... *we*... can do about it."

"Wait. You mean... you *still* want to stay *with* me? Knowing what this thing *really* is around my neck? And what I *could* do... and *have* done, and not even *know* I've done it?"

"You're our *friend* Amanda," Thian says, gazing into her stunning green eyes. "And friends *stick* together, through the *best* and *worst* of times, if at all *possible*. Let's just hope though, that the worst really *won't* be that bad."

Amanda turns to Tia, Tianna and Sadie.

"Well, don't think you're getting rid of *me* that easily," Tianna snorts. "Heck, *I'm* just gettin' to *like* you. Never really know *what* you're going to do next. It's a real *hoot*!"

They all laugh, and then Tianna says seriously, "Besides... I've got a *score* to settle."

"And I can't let Tianna go where you go without *me*," Tia says with a smile. "After all, *who's* going to keep her out of *trouble*?"

"You mean, there's actually somebody that *can*?" Amanda says with a laugh.

"And *I'm* coming too," Sadie says skipping around Tianna. "*I'll* watch Tianna, and make sure she doesn't get into *any* trouble. *Right*, Tianna?"

Everyone laughs again and heads back down the tunnel.

They make their way back into the large cavern and spot Cassandra and Anastasia in a *heated* discussion, in low voices. When the two of them hear Amanda and the others coming, they both get up, Cassandra saying, "*Our* turn." Anastasia gives a nervous smile saying, "Uh, we'll be right back," and quickly walk away.

Taking their seats, Tia says quietly, "Wonder what *that* was all about?"

"Knowing Cassandra as we *do*..." Tianna says with a sneer, "you can *bet* it's nothing good."

In a couple minutes, Anastasia and Cassandra come back in and take their seats on the far couch. They give weak smiles to the others, then Anastasia says, "Amanda, I'm *sorry*. I had *no* idea you had, well, that your *necklace* was full of... um... it's just all kind of *scary*, is all. I can't even *imagine* how you must feel. And, it's hard to imagine *all* the things you've been through already. I *know* you're not an evil person, and I *really* like you. But, it's a little *scary*. Knowing what you... really *could* do, if you got *mad* or something."

"Thanks. It *is* scary, and I really don't *want* this thing. I'm really hoping they *can* find a way to get it off."

Just then, Jasmine trots into the room, followed by a floating table, holding the cauldron with Ellanya's face distorting in the green vapor. Bellinora rounds the corner and enters as well.

Jasmine jumps up on her pedestal and sits staring at Amanda. The table floats to the cavern floor next to Bellinora's chair, and Bellinora takes her seat.

"I trust everyone is refreshed, and that we have all calmed down," Bellinora says with a warm smile.

"Amanda, would you please continue your story. You had just dipped the necklace into the lake, and saw it *glowing*. Please continue from there."

"Okay. Well, after I thought the necklace glowed, or had given some kind of *weird* reflection, I rinsed off the key and looked it over really good. Then I put the necklace and the key into the side pocket of my backpack."

Amanda tells them how she then wiped off the book and looked it over, and really *liked* that it was hand written, and that she had really liked the detailed drawing of all kinds of *creatures*, crystals and other things. And, that she had thought the *hundreds* of pages showing what looked like an *orchestra* leader waving a stick, were *very* interesting, since she did not learn it was a *wand* till after she met Thian and the others.

She tells them that she put the big book into her backpack, and headed off along the lake's edge, in the direction it appeared the skeleton had been coming *from*, thinking there *must* be some way out in that direction.

Clearing her throat, Amanda tells them of following the crystal-lined path she had found, and following it to where she discovered the old row boat, and about her *adventure* with the Alligator Garfish, and being taken from one cavern to another by a *strong* current.

Bellinora stops Amanda when she mentions that the boat was taken from cavern to cavern, and chats with Jasmine and Ellanya, then has Amanda continue.

"Well, *then* I saw what looked like *white* water rapids, only they were kind of *green* because of the glowing water."

Amanda tells them of her *harrowing* adventure down the rapids and how the little boat had *burst* into pieces when it had gotten jammed against the sides, ceiling and floor, within a *narrow* section of the cave tunnel she had been shooting through.

Becoming quite animated, Amanda tells them that she *somehow* found the wooden plank used as the bench in the rowboat, and that she had held onto it while *whipping* down the rapids for a while, until it was *ripped* away from her. Sadie gives a *cry* and clutches Tianna.

"It's *okay* Sadie," Amanda says with a smile. "I *make* it out okay." Sadie smiles and lessens her grip on Tianna's nail marked arm.

"I was *really* scared! I couldn't *swim*, and I was *shooting* along the narrow rapids, being *whipped* around the corners so *violently*, I thought I would be *killed* slamming into the rocks sticking out of the walls, and the ones in the *water*."

"I eventually *shot* off the end of a short waterfall, and landed in a *huge* lake. The current seemed to turn into a very gentle one. I was panicked, and thought I would *drown*, just *thrashing* around, trying to stay above water. Then, I found that *same* plank I used before, floating *right* beside me. I grabbed onto it, and kicking my feet, made my way to the shoreline."

Bellinora stops Amanda there and says, "Before you continue Amanda, we would like to give some observations thus far. Concerning the boat, I am sure we will figure out to *whom* it belongs later in the story. However, as to the *Alligator* Garfish, you mentioned that there were *plenty* of fish in the lake, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Alligator Gar, while they *can* be aggressive, are not *generally* found in that part of your realm. They also, do not *generally* grow that large..."

“And with all the *smaller* fish in the lake, which would be *easy* prey for them,” Ellanya says smiling, “*why* do you think they decided to go after... *you*?”

“I... well, I never really *thought* about it.”

“Amanda,” Bellinora says leaning forward a little. “We believe those Gar were *placed* in that lake, as *part* of a spell to stop you, or *anyone* else, that found their way *into* the lake. However, we believe that strange *current* that seemed to stay in the middle of the lake, and took you *directly* through the center of the arches... was a spell to lead you *safely* through the caverns.”

“Well, *that* didn’t work so well,” Amanda says shaking her head. “I almost *died* when the boat blew apart.”

“Yes, and you *would* have too.” Bellinora continues, “Do you not think it *strange*, that a young girl, who *cannot* swim, seems to stay *more* or less afloat, and is not *sucked* under and *drowned*?”

Amanda does not say anything, but had thought the *same* thing many times after her adventure.

“We think you were *helped* by the spell cast to keep you *alive* and safe,” Ellanya says with a wavering smile within the vapor. “You were caught in a *fight* between two previously cast spells.”

“Of course...” Bellinora continues, “we cannot be *entirely* sure who cast the spells, or for *whom* they were originally cast. But think about *this*. Do you not think it was... *very* lucky the boat *burst* apart and the large plank just *happened* to be right within your reach the *moment* you needed it? *Before* being whisked *violently* down the rapids?”

“It was *torn* from your hands,” Ellanya says, “but somehow *you* managed to stay afloat and *not* go under... in *violent* rapids... *really*?”

“And Amanda,” Bellinora says nodding, “when you went over the falls and into the pool below, you *knew* you would drown. Do you not think it was rather *lucky*, that the *same* plank just *happened* to float right beside you, when you needed it the *most* again? Are these not a few too *many* coincidences?”

Amanda turns to her friends, and sees Thian and Tia exchanging startled looks, while Sadie looks up into Tianna’s wide eyes.

Turning back to Bellinora, Amanda stutters, “I... well... I just thought I *was* lucky is all.”

“More of an *unusual* luck, I think,” Ellanya smiles. “Please, continue. What did you find when you reached the shoreline. I am willing to *bet* there was a *path* to follow... am I *right*?”

“Yeah, there *was*,” Amanda says looking at Ellanya smiling in the waving vapor. Amanda tells them how she had followed a path that looked like *mown* down crystals, and how she had *smelled* something like *rotten* eggs. Then how she had spotted the *huge* wooden door, set into the rock of the giant cliff face.

“The smell was getting *really* bad,” Amanda says wrinkling up her nose. “I was looking up near the top of the really tall door, when I *stepped* on something, lost my balance, and fell *right* into a huge pile of *skeletons*, which were in some kind of *hole*.”

Both Cassandra and Anastasia gasp, looking at Amanda as though they may throw up.

“A *pile* of skeletons Amanda?” Bellinora asks tilting her head. “And they were in a... *hole* of some kind? Like a... *pit*?”

“Yeah. Actually, they were even *stacked* up in a mound *out* of the pit too. When I fell into the pit, I was *really* scared and started *thrashing* around trying to get out. All I did though, was make all the bones *shatter*, and as they did, I kept falling *further* into the pit, with their *bones* falling all over *me*. It really *freaked* me out!”

Once again, Bellinora, Jasmine and Ellanya chat quickly for a few moments, then have Amanda continue.

“When I was in the pit, I got one of my *hands* stuck in a rib cage, and my *other* one slipped into the *mouth* of a skull. It actually looked like it was trying to *eat* me.”

Ellanya, Jasmine and Bellinora exchange quick looks, as Sadie lets out a *cry* and pulls her feet up, making a tight ball of her body, snuggling tightly against Tianna.

Amanda tells how *beetles* scurried out of the eye sockets and into the nose and such, making her *thrash* even more, sending her farther down into the pit. She then tells them how, once *out* of the pit, she had *slammed* the rib cage against a boulder, shattering it to pieces.

Next, Amanda tells them how the jaw had *broken* away from the skull, and a broken tooth had *bit* her on the thumb, making it *bleed*.

Jasmine lets out a rather *loud* mew, then she, Bellinora and Ellanya begin a rather lengthy conversation.

Amanda has to stifle a laugh, as she watches Jasmine sitting up on her pedestal, mumbling in her strange *cat* speak, while moving her head around in quite an *animated* fashion. Both Bellinora and Ellanya intently listening to her every... *meow*. They are actually *listening* to a... *cat*!

“Yes, I think you may be *right* Jasmine. *Interesting*,” Bellinora says turning back to look at Amanda.

“Amanda, you say the jaw *broke* away, once you were *out* of the pit. Are you telling us, that the jaw was *still* attached to the skull all that time?”

“Well, *yeah*... so?”

“Amanda,” Ellanya says softly, “when a person decays, the jaw *detaches* from the skull. It does not *stay* attached.”

“Well, *this* one did.”

“Yes, but only those with certain... *powers*, are imbued with the Wizitch *capable* of keeping the skull and jaw attached. These would be *very* evil people indeed. And you say it, well, *bit* you?”

“Yeah, it *did*... so?”

Bellinora asks, “What happened then Amanda?”

She tells them how she spotted the large pile of armor, *shields*, swords, *daggers*, breast and backplates, a strange kind of *metal* boots, helmets and even *chain* mail and chain gloves of an unusual kind.

“So, I went through the pile of stuff, and set the ones I *liked* to the side. So once I got back to the surface, I could come back sometime later and *get* ‘em.”

“This is where you found *all* your armor then? The sword, shield, *helmet* and other items?” Ellanya asks eagerly.

“Yep. Josh and *Sam* have all the armor now. They got *really* excited about the sword, *didn’t* they?” Amanda asks looking to Thian, Tia and Tianna. They all smile and nod. “*We* couldn’t read the writing on the blade, but *they* could.” Turning back her friends she asks, “*What* did Sam say the writing said?”

Tia says, “She said, ‘*Lancer*, Keeper of the Flame of *Alendur*’.”

This gets *quite* a reaction from Bellinora, Jasmine and Ellanya. They instantly begin a *very* excited conversation, with eyes darting from one to the other.

Ellanya is swirling so much in her vapor, Amanda can *no* longer see her form. Jasmine is mumbling away *most* animatedly, even lifting her *paws* from time to time, and *waving* them around like Bellinora was waving *her* arms and hands.

“But... it is just too *difficult* to believe. Can it *really* be?” Ellanya says, her form slowly settling in the waving vapor.

“That’s *exactly* what *Sam* said,” Amanda says with a smile. “Sam said something about, after *all* these millennia, it has *finally* come to pass, and something about the *jewels* in the handle. They, well, even began to *cry*, didn’t they?” Amanda asks looking to her friends. All of them nod back to her.

“Mother, can you *believe* that? Amanda... is not only the one who *found* and wears the *Necklace of Power*, but found *and* carried... *Lancer*?! This is getting more *confusing* all the time! How in *Creations* name, could she possess *both*... and not have something... well, *very* interesting happen?”

“I have *no* idea dear. This is almost *too* much to take in. It is going to take me some time to *process* all of this.”

“We knew the sword must be *very* valuable, because *Sam* said something like, ‘If they *only* knew of its *true* worth.’”

“You have *no* idea!” Ellanya says with a laugh.

Amanda continues, “Loki, he’s the *Dwarf* I told you about, said that the sword came from someplace called the *Temple of Ashakar*, which was the highest tower within the *lost* city of Elboreth. I didn’t have *time* to check out the entire city while I was *there* though, just a little bit... but from what I *saw*, I bet it was *really* something.”

“You... you were *in* the lost city?” Ellanya asks with her eyes wide.

“Oh yeah, and I got there *just* in time too. But I’ll tell you about that later. Josh and *Sam* both seemed really surprised that I was wearing the necklace, and had *used* the sword too,” Amanda says with a smile.

“Wait. You... you actually *used* the sword? While wearing the *necklace*? On *what*... or, on *who*? What are you *talking* about?” Bellinora asks with a truly stunned expression.

“I’m *almost* to that part. Well, *one* of them anyway,” Amanda laughs timidly.

“Are you *telling* us, that you *used* the sword, more than *once*?” Ellanya asks, her eyes going wide again. “Thor’s *thunder*! *This* ought to be something. Please... continue.”

“Oh, well, I *forgot*, when I first pulled the sword out of the pile, I saw that it was almost *completely* covered in thick, dark black... *stains* I thought. *Thicker* than on the broken sword I found, next to the *skeleton* with the necklace.

“But... I *guess* the black stuff was really *blood* though huh? Anyway, I wiped it of on my T-shirt, and I could hardly see an *edge* on it, because of all the dried *blood*. Then, like an *idiot*, I ran my finger over the thick dried, ah, *blood* along the edge of the blade. I *cut* my finger pretty *bad*, and had to *suck* on it for a minute to get the stinging to stop.”

Jasmine makes some quick mewling sounds, whereupon Bellinora says, “*Shush*, not *now* Jasmine,” and motions for Amanda to continue, while Jasmine *mumbles* something under her breath.

“Well, like I *said*, I went through the pile and put the stuff I really liked... and that *fit*... and that were really *light*... to the side.”

“Tell her about the cool *shield* you found,” Thian says with a huge grin.

“Oh *yeah!* The shield was kind of a *teardrop* shape, and had a really detailed image of a *skull* on it! *Loki* said he looked up the image in some old *books* his dad had, and said the shield was from the line of... of...”

“From the line of *Morden*.” Tia says in a hushed tone, everyone straining to hear her.

“*Morden!*” Ellanya gasps. “Great *Mother* of Creation! What an *evil, vile* family! Oh, the *trouble* they have caused! There are still some living *today* I hear, though I have *no* idea how many. They have been trying to get their *hands* on the *Artifact* since the beginning.” Then looking to Bellinora, says, “Whoever had that *shield*, must have been after, and tried to *fight* the *Wielder of Power*.”

“Yeah, well, we know how *that* turned out for ‘em,” Tianna says putting an arm around Sadie. “Tell them about the *chest* and backplate, and the *helmet*.”

“Okay. Well, the chest and backplate were *really* light, and fit pretty good. *Loki* said he had looked them up too, and they were from...” Amanda turns to look to Thian.

“They were from the *Selten* family of the Dwarves,” Thian says with a smile. “*Loki* said they were a *noble* family, and that there were still a few of *them* around too... as far as he knows.”

“The *Seltens*...” Ellanya says with a slight smile. “Now *there* is a name I have not heard in a good number of years. Wonder how *Selma* is doing?”

“Oh, I... don’t *know* really,” Amanda says awkwardly. “The *helmet* is really cool though. It has sharp *spikes* all over it. And you could flip the visor *up* and down when you needed to. It came in *really* handy when I was *inside* the snake.”

“Excuse me?” Bellinora asks looking bewildered. “When you were... *inside* a snake?”

“Yeah, *sorry*, that doesn’t come till later. But *anyway*, the helmet saved me *several* times actually. *Where* was it from?”

“*Loki* said it was from... if you *believe* it... the *Chacutas* race,” Tianna says watching Bellinora very carefully.

“Oh *my*,” Bellinora says with a hand to her chin. “Why, they have not been around for some three *thousand* years or so. A *vicious* warring tribe of real *cutthroats* - liked to kill and *torture* most any other race they could find. *Horrible* creatures. And you wore *that* helmet Amanda? Along with the breast and backplate? While *carrying* the sword?”

“Yes *Mam*, and I’m really *glad* I had them too. If not... I’d be *dead* now.”

Jasmine, Bellinora and Ellanya exchange looks, then motion for Amanda to continue.

“Wait, what about the *dagger*?” Thian asks. “I know you didn’t find it till *later*, and Josh and Sam went *nuts*, but, since you’re talking about where stuff is *from*...”

“Okay, sure. Like Thian said, I didn’t find the *dagger* until a *lot* later, but, *Loki* had looked it up and said that it was from the *High Elves* of *Elenor* in the *East*, and was at least seven *thousand* years old.”

Jasmine *jumps* off her pedestal, dashes across the room, and *disappears* into the tunnel. Bellinora and Ellanya had both *gasped* and have now locked eyes with their mouths wide open.

“What? What *is* it?” Amanda asks nervously.

“If it is the dagger we *think* it is...” Bellinora says as Jasmine trots into the room with a scroll in her teeth, “its value is beyond any you could *possibly* comprehend, when combined with that of the *sword*.”

Jasmine jumps up onto her pedestal. Bellinora takes the scroll and unrolls it. Turning it around she says, “Is *this* what you found?” The color image drifts to Amanda, catching it she looks it over closely. She passes it to Sadie, who after looking at it, passes it to Tianna, Tia and Thian. They look it over and nod to Amanda.

“That’s *it*... I’m *sure* of it. Josh and Sam even *cried* when they saw it. They said it had belonged to their *son*, the one who wrote the *Journal* I found. I think his name was...”

“*Alistar*,” Ellanya says with eyes wide and a faraway look. “Then it *is* true. The dagger did *indeed* belong to Alistar, and was given him by the *Lord* of the High Elves himself. Yes, I remember it well. Josh and Sam were *so* proud.”

“Mother... not *now*,” Bellinora says softly, but firmly.

“Yes, of *course* dear. You say you also found Alistar’s *Journal*, Amanda?”

“Yes Mam, but again, not till a good deal later. Do you want me to tell you *now*, or when I *get* there in my story?”

“When you get to it will be fine,” Bellinora says, still looking as though she cannot believe all she is hearing, but knows that *every* word is true. “Please continue Amanda.”

“That’s about it as far as the stuff I took, but the pile of armor and stuff, was *really* huge. After that, I looked at the really giant door. It was *really* neat. It was about twenty to *twenty-five* feet tall I guess. It was made of wood, and in the *shape* of a very tall pointed *arch*. It had this really *beautiful* image of a face, about *three* quarters of the way up. The face had what looked like flowing *hair* coming out of it, and kind of *swirled* away from the face, going all the way up to the very top of the door. There wasn’t any *body* though, just the *waving* hair. Oh, and it *looked* like it was made of polished *opals*.

“Let’s see... there was a really *cool* frame around the entire door too. It looked kind of like chiseled blue-green *marble*. There was a big, really old looking tarnished brass *ring* about the same height as my head. Um... above *that*, was some kind of a long *sliding* latch. Oh, and there was this *huge* green-blue *writing* on the door, right in the middle. *It* was really tarnished too. I couldn’t *read* it though.”

Bellinora and Ellanya turn to one another, each giving a short nod, like they understand what Amanda had been looking at.

“The *scary* part really, was that huge carved red *face* just above the tip of the door. That *really* creeped me out! Other than that, the only other thing I saw at *that* point, was the really *foul* smelling red *mist* coming from under the door.”

“Amanda, would you stop for a moment please?” Bellinora asks evenly. “Jasmine, would you please bring in the image of the Keepers Door? I’d like Amanda to take a look at it.”

Jasmine gives what to Amanda looks like a nod, jumps down and trots back down the tunnel.

Amanda takes this opportunity to take a sip of her drink, and asks Bellinora, “Do you think you’ve *heard* of the door I found?”

Smiling, Bellinora says, “I believe I *have*. And if it is the one I have in *mind*... the *rest* of your story should be *very* interesting.”

“You can say *that* again!” Ellanya laughs, swirling up some vapor.

Jasmine comes trotting into the room with another scroll in her teeth, and jumps up onto her pedestal. Bellinora thanks her and unrolls the scroll, showing it to Jasmine, then to Ellanya, who smiles and nods. Bellinora waves her hand and the scroll drifts over to Amanda.

Amanda catches the scroll, unrolls it, then exclaims in surprise, “That’s *it*! That’s it *exactly*! Even the two sparkling *column*-like things on either side of the *door*! And that’s the *same* red face too... and the *opal* face with the *hair* rising to the top of the door. That’s the same *writing* too, at least it *looks* like it. And I’d know that red *mist* anywhere. Man... did that ever *stink*!”

“Could *we* see it Amanda?” Tia asks.

Amanda passes what looks like a photograph of the cavern and door to Sadie, who hands it to Tianna. Sadie and Tianna look it over really well, then pass it to Tia and Thian. After they look at it, and pass it back to Amanda, she passes it to Anastasia and Cassandra.

In the meantime, Jasmine, Bellinora and Ellanya are *deep* in excited, albeit *whispered*, conversation.

Thian, Tia, Tianna and Sadie are chatting away, as are Anastasia and Cassandra, who have just passed the scroll back to Amanda, who keeps looking at the image on the scroll, playing back what had happened after going through that door.

“Alright Amanda, may I have the scroll please?” Bellinora waves her hand, and the scroll rolls itself up, and floats back to rest in front of Jasmine on her pedestal.

“We are *certain* now, that we know the *precise* location of this door,” Bellinora says with a smile, but also a look of curiosity. “We are most *anxious* to hear what happened when you *opened* that door, and what you... *encountered* on the other side. You *did* of course, need to use the *key* you found... am I correct?”

“Yeah, I did. But, how did *you* know that key fit that door?”

Bellinora smiles saying, “As I just stated, we *know* the door you were standing at. Please continue.”

Amanda tells them how she had tried to open the door, but it just wouldn’t budge and how after trying several times, she noticed the little odd shaped hole in the cavern wall next to the door.

“I took off my backpack, and pulled the *key* and necklace out, then *dropped* the necklace and the pack...”

“You *dropped* the *Artifact*?!” Ellanya cries, “Great *Mother*!”

“Well, *yeah*. I hadn’t put it *on* yet. Anyway, the key *fit* and I heard *clanking* noises going up the side of the door. I opened it a little, and some *mist* came in and *wrapped* around my ankles. It was kind of *warm*, but not hot. Actually it was really *weird* stuff. I was really surprised to see that the door was some *two* feet thick. But I figured out *why* a little later, *belieeeve* me!”

Bellinora, Ellanya and the others could not help but laugh, with Amanda’s tone and the expression on her face.

“As I pulled the door open, a *stream* of the red mist came swirling in and wrapped *around* me to my waist. It kind of like, *moved* down my body, and then started spreading out like *tendrils* as it hit the cooler floor of the cavern. It almost looked like it was... well, *searching* for something.

“The smell was *horrible*! I had to move back some, because it made me *gag*. I then only opened the door enough to stick my *head* through. It was really *hard* to breathe, the stinking *fumes* were stinging my eyes, and it really *burned* my lungs, every time I took a *breath*. It constantly made me feel like I was going to *throw* up. I remember I got really *dizzy* too.”

Amanda tells them how she pulled the door open, took only a few steps inside, to have a quick look around, thinking some *monster* might be in there waiting for her, but did not see anything other than the red mist, which looked like it turned into a red *fog* further in. Then how she discovered that the crystal pathway she had been following, *continued* on the other side of the door.

“That’s when I went back through the door to get my backpack. I put the key back in the pack, put the *necklace* on and then...”

“Wait!” Bellinora says leaning forward. “You just *picked* it up and put it on? Are you *sure*? Please think *carefully* Amanda. This is of the *utmost* importance! Tell us *exactly* what happened... no matter *how* trivial!”

“Well, let’s see... Oh! *That’s* right! I remember that I picked up the necklace then *dropped* it. I picked it up again, but when I reached to put it in the pocket of my backpack, I *dropped* it again. It was kind of *weird* actually, now that I think back on it. That *second* time, it actually felt like something had *yanked* it out of my hand.” Then laughing, Amanda says, “Like it didn’t *want* to go into the pocket.”

Bellinora, Jasmine and Ellanya exchange knowing looks.

“I couldn’t believe I had *dropped* it again. I quickly grabbed it with *both* hands. I remember it slipping a little, because of my *bloody* finger from being cut on the blade, and from my *thumb*, where that *stupid* tooth from that scary skull had *bit* me. That cut had opened up again too.

“I remember seeing a streak of blood along the *chain* once I picked it up. Then, I just *slipped* it over my head. I got up real quick and, well... I felt like a strange *tingling* sensation shoot *right* through my body. It gave me the *goosies*.

“That’s about *it* really. I then slipped my backpack back on, and went back through the doorway into the mist.”

Bellinora stops Amanda, while she, Jasmine and Ellanya chat excitedly for almost an hour. The kids sit nervously, trying to figure out what is being said, chatting among themselves.

“Alright Amanda,” Bellinora finally says with a smile. “Things are *now* beginning to make some sense. Please continue from when you stepped through the doorway into the mist.”

“Okay.” Amanda takes them through how she had walked a ways wondering if some *monster* might be in there waiting for her, and then, how she had thought that a monster might not be on this side, but on the side that she had come *from*, and that maybe the *monster* had killed all those people and put them in a pit, then piled up their armor - like a *dragon* might do with its treasure. How she had gone back to close the door, but saw her pile of armor just off to one side.

“So, I went through the door and put on all the armor, grabbed the shield and sword, then went back into the mist and locked the door. As I walked, the *stench* was growing stronger and made my stomach feel like I might *throw* up. The *fumes* kept making my eyes sting too. That red mist... *fog* stuff... was really *horrible*! I’m still not sure what *made* it red though, even though I did find a red *boiling* lake.”

“Amanda, I am going to stop you here for a moment.” Bellinora says holding up a hand. “I think you need to know, and understand a few things. As you know, the *necklace* was created by the most *evil* of the Dark side of Wizitch. Perhaps *tens* of thousands of the most evil, *vile* spirits are *trapped* within *each* of the gems of that necklace. They were trapped there, to *do* the bidding of the *Wielder of Power*. The Wielder was *always* intended to be someone who was *extremely* evil, and had reached the *highest* level of Wizitch training, within their Order. In other words, an *already* tremendously power *witch* or wizard... on the *Dark* side. Should the necklace be found by someone *not* worthy to wield it... someone not *evil* enough... and *they* touched the necklace, they would be killed *instantly*.”

Amanda begins to speak, but Bellinora raises her hands saying, “Please... let me finish. We all know that *you* are not evil at all. And *that* has bothered us greatly... till now. As I was saying, *only* someone deemed worthy by the watcher, would be *allowed* to pick up the necklace and place it around their neck.

“The ancient spell which was cast, allows the necklace to *shrink* once around the new Wielders neck, which would *prevent* it from ever coming off, by accident, or *otherwise*... or so

the stories go. Yes, it does loosen up so it drapes nicely, but if it begins to rise, it *shrinks* quickly. It is *bound* to the Wearer.

“Now... when you *first* grabbed the necklace, you had just *cut* yourself on the blade of the broken sword, which was *covered* in dried blood. Amanda, *that* sword, must have belonged to someone on the *Light* side of Wizitch!

“When you wiped the blade with your injured finger, *some*, perhaps only a *very* small amount of that blood, had transferred to your *right* hand. When you first *touched* and tried to pick up the necklace... we *believe* that the watcher got *confused*.

“Remember, the *test* for the new Wielder, is to *cut* themselves, and smear their blood on the necklace, so the watcher could determine if they were truly *evil*, or someone of the *Light*, which would mean they would instantly be *killed*.

“The little bit of blood from your fingers, had not only *your* blood... which would be detected as blood of the *Light*... but, we think that the *ratio* of dried blood, which had dissolved within just a touch of you *own* blood... was *enough* for the watcher to detect great *evil*, and *good* at the same time. Of course, there must have been a good deal more *evil* detected, from the dissolved blood... or you would have been *killed* on the spot.”

The kids are all wide eyed, all mouths open.

“But... why couldn’t I pick it *up* then?” Amanda asks very confused.

“Good question,” Ellanya says nodding. “We believe the watcher *was* actually trying to decide whether to *kill* you or not.”

Everyone gasps.

“However,” Bellinora continues. “You then told us you reached down with your *left* hand, which had *several* fluids on it. True, one was *your* blood, but your blood was *never* alone. When you had cut yourself, and *sucked* on your finger to stop the pain, that *evil* blood entered your bloodstream. The cut on your finger from the *blade* you carried, was *thick* with the most *foul* of evil blood, and had *remained* thick on your finger.

“When you reached down with *both* hands,” Ellanya says looking at Amanda, “the dissolved *evil* blood was smeared over the *Artifact*, along with some *saliva*... which was *filled* with evil particles. We believe the *ratio* of evil detected, was at least a *magnitude* higher... at that *precise* moment, and fooled the watcher into *believing* you were indeed *worthy* to take it.”

“When you had *dropped* the necklace, and you tried to pick it up later,” Bellinora continues, “the watcher was confused *again*... or at least that is what we *think*, and while further thinking things over, the watcher made you *drop* the necklace. When you reached down this time with *both* hands though, you now have the *very* evil blood that had been on the *sword* you would soon carry, along with particles, or *slivers* from the... *bite* you got from the broken tooth. Those minute particles or slivers, *also* entered your bloodstream. We *think* however, that perhaps a broken sliver from the tooth *remained* at the surface of your cut, which the watcher detected as *extreme* evil.”

Ellanya cuts in, “The dissolved, *evil* blood, was again detected to be *magnitudes* higher than any good detected. The watcher was now *convinced*... through a *false* positive... that you were not only *evil*, but *immensely* evil. You see, the blood on the *sword*, more than likely, was from dozens, if not *hundreds* of the most foul and *evil* creatures. Amanda, that sword you found and took with you, belonged to the side of the *Light*. So, of *course*, the blood on it was from the *Dark* side. When that blood *smeared* onto the *Artifact* that final time you attempted to pick it up... it was *so* coated in the evil blood off the blade, the watcher was *convinced* beyond a shadow of a

doubt, and you were allowed to not only pick it up... but to *place* it around your neck, which *completed* the bond!”

“Amanda, as I have said before,” Bellinora now continues, “once the necklace *has* been placed around the neck of the new Wielder... they *then* become the *Wielder of Power*, and *must* be protected at *all* costs, by the spell cast upon all those trapped within the necklace. Through the most *unlikely* series of events... *you* have become the new, *Wielder of Power*.”

“The thing is though,” Ellanya says seriously, “we have *no* idea what will happen *now*. The *Artifact* was *never* designed to be worn by someone like you. Someone who is *truly* of the Light, and with what most whom have met you thus far, would suspect as possessing *no* Wizitch abilities at all... but *that* is another story to be told at a later time.”

“Amanda,” Bellinora says sitting back in her chair. “When you stood up, after putting the necklace on, you say you felt a jolt run through your body. That first *jolt* or tingling is known as the *Bond*. It is the *permanent* bonding between *you*... and the necklace. From *that* point on... you became one.”

“But, I don’t *want*...”

Bellinora holds up her hands saying, “We know. But for now, there is nothing *any* of us can do. You *must* learn to control the necklace, or... well, we simply do *not* know at this point.”

“Also, when you began to walk into the mist,” Ellanya begins, “you almost could not *breath*, got dizzy and *almost* passed out. However, once the *Artifact* was *on*, and you went back into the mist, it still *stung* your eyes, and *burned* your lungs some... but it was not anywhere *near* as bad as it had been. *Was* it?”

Thinking for a moment, Amanda then says softly, “No. Not really...”

“And as you walked, the mist was *all* around you, but I bet, not *quite* touching you... is that right?” Ellanya asks.

Again, concentrating very hard, thinking back, Amanda says, “Yeah, actually... but *wasn’t* it just, *I* don’t know, like the *temperature* difference between *me* and the mist that was doing that?”

“No,” Bellinora says shaking her head. “It was the necklace *protecting* you.”

“*Protecting* me?” Amanda asks confused. “You mean, from the *mist*?”

“Yes,” Bellinora smiles. “If it had not... you would have *died* within another two minutes. You see, that red mist is an *extremely* toxic, *poisonous* gas.”

Everyone gasps and looks at Amanda, whose eyes go *wide* as her jaw drops.

“Poison... *gas*?” Amanda sputters. “You mean, without the necklace... I would have walked into, well, the *fog* and... and...”

“You would have *died*,” Ellanya says nodding, making her vapor swirl. “The *Artifact* was keeping the mist *away* from you, somehow, even *filtering* it. It was as though you were walking in a protective *bubble* of sorts. The *gas* was being kept away, while filtering the *poison* enough through some *unknown* Wizitch, to *us* anyway, to keep you alive. It would *still* sting your eyes and burn your lungs some, and as you have said, really *stink*. But, you *would* survive... as obviously you did.”

“But, who would do such a *horrible* thing, like filling a cavern with *poison* gas?” Tianna asks shaking her head.

“The *High Council* of the *Ancients* is our best guess Tianna,” Bellinora says with a smile.

“That door,” Ellanya says smiling as well, “was put there to shut the *way*, to both the ancient city, and to the ancient *transport* chambers. The wording on the door you found Amanda, says, ‘the way is shut.’ And the *way* is very well protected on the other side, as you must have encountered.”

“The *way* is shut?” Amanda asks. “Why do they say, ‘the *way* is shut’, and not something like, well, ‘no trespassing,’ or ‘*private* property, keep out,’ or ‘no entrance,’ ‘do not enter,’ or something like that? It’s weird, but I’ve heard the phrase ‘the *way* is shut,’ several times in other books and even in some *movies*. Usually really *old* though.”

Bellinora laughs, as does Ellanya, who then says, “Actually, that is a good question Amanda. The people of *many* realms use many phrases which mean the *same* thing, just stated differently. And, you are quite correct, in the ancient times, the word ‘way’ was used very often. But, the word way is still used today, not only in this realm, but *millions* of others. In fact, it is used a great deal in your earth realm.

“The word way may be used in many, well, *ways*. For instance, as a thoroughfare for travel, or transportation from place to place, or as an opening for passage. Like in saying, ‘this door is the only *way* into or out of this room.’ It can be used as the course traveled, from one place to another, such as when talking about a route. Someone may say something like, ‘Amanda was searching for the way to Witch Mountain’.

“In the case of the door you found, it was simply stating that the *way*... or passage beyond the door, was closed to everyone not *specifically* authorized to enter. It was in a sense saying, ‘no passage beyond this point. *All* roads and *paths* have been closed.’”

“The wonderful opal *face* on the door you saw,” Ellanya says with a nod, “was not that of a face with *hair*, but depicting what *happens* to one, when traveling in the... *ways* of the ancient transportation chambers, which you and some of your friends experienced *firsthand* evidently. It depicts your body changing into a form of a *shimmering* opalescent smoke-like substance. You can think, and are *fully* aware, and yet have *no* body.

“That image on the door was an indication that the *way* to the transportation chambers was shut to all. The huge *red* face above the door, indicates that *death* awaits all who choose to ignore the warning, and are *foolish* enough, not only to make their... *way* through the doorway, but to *continue* on their way, once on the other side.”

“Amanda, as I have said, we know *precisely* where you were, and what you *must* have found within the poison fog, on the *other* side of the door. To be sure, let *me* tell *you* what Jasmine, Ellanya and I, *think* you found.

“Within the mist, you find very *fearsome*, frilled lizards, and of *course* the boiling red lake, which had a spell cast upon it to *create* the poison gas. You can tell us what *happened* in there in a minute if you like, but I would venture a guess, that you ended up *fighting* them, and *somehow*, your sword even seemed to... *move* on its *own* from time to time? As though it was *swinging* on its own, and *you* were simply holding onto it?”

All Amanda can do is listen in stunned silence, and nod.

“You somehow, or actually, *because* of the necklace, make it through that *second* line of defense, the *first* being the poison gas itself. You must have, at *some* point, encountered the *larger* flying lizards - *very* vicious as I recall. I’m not sure *how* you made it into the next *cavern* however, because you would have had to *cross* the boiling lake, which is also composed of a *very quick* acting *acid*. Also, brooms and *wands* will not work at all in those caverns, once you entered through that *first* door, into the mist. *Somehow*, you got into the next very large cavern.

“There you encountered *gigantic* structures, which I am told, look something like trees with *wonderfully* colored tops... like an upturned *umbrella* of some sort. These however, are *not* trees, but *gigantic lizards*, which have actually become *part* of the living jungle-like cavern there.

“You *must* have fought the huge flying lizards too at *some* point, and perhaps even the *giant* tree-like creatures. But *another* very fierce creature makes its way through those caverns as well.

Huge *quilled* creatures, with very large *black* eyes, and a very large and *sharp* beak. They *kill* by shooting quills from their tail, then *ripping* apart their victims, with their *sharp* beaks. How am I doing *so far*?”

Amanda and the others are *stunned*. “Well, *so far*, you’re *right* on. I can’t *believe* you know all this.”

Bellinora smiles, then has Amanda continue her story, giving all the details and adventures she had within the caverns. Everyone sits *riveted* by the telling.

A couple hours later, after being asked to repeat sections of the story again, with Bellinora, Ellanya and Jasmine having *many* an excited conversation, Amanda gets to where she found the old broken down house.

“This I believe,” Ellanya says with interest, “is where you found the *dagger*. I would *very* much like to hear *where* you found it, and the condition it was in.”

“Oh, okay. I found the dagger, *belt* and stuff under the *floorboards* in that old broken down house, after I crossed the *red* hot bridge. The inside of the house looked like it had been *torn* apart... like someone had been *searching* for something.”

“Yes, I imagine they *were*,” Ellanya says nodding. “Was the dagger *with* its belt, in *good* condition?”

“Yeah, in fact, it looked *brand* new. The *jewels* were really bright. I really *liked* them. Too bad we had to *sell* the little gem in the belt buckle though...”

“*What!*” Bellinora cries leaning forward, wide- eyed and looking *horrified*. “You... you *sold* one of the *jewels*? Why in *all* the ways of *Wizitch*, would you *do* such a thing?”

“I... I didn’t have any *money* at all, and... and I couldn’t just let *Thian* pay for me all the time! I wanted to sell one of the *big* jewels, like in the *goblet*, or in the *sword* but...”

“Great *Mother* of Creation!” Bellinora gasps, “*Please* tell me you did *not* sell any others... *especially* from the sword!”

“No. Just that *one*. And we got a good *price* too. I *split* it all with Thian, Tia, Tianna and Thea. Oh, and *Loki* and his dad.”

“Daughter...” Ellanya begins with a shaky voice. “*Without* that jewel, the...”

“*Later* mother. But, we *must* let Na Dama know at once, unless... *Amanda*, did you tell Josh and Sam about selling the jewel?”

“Yes, and *they* were pretty upset too, but didn’t say why. *What’s* the matter? It was only *one* little jewel anyway.”

“You have *no* idea what you have *done* child,” Ellanya says almost angrily.

“What is done is *done* mother. I am sure that Josh and Sam have informed Na Dama of the matter. And to *whom* it is that they suspected *found* the sword and dagger.”

“Oh, I would have *loved* to have been there for *that* one!” Ellanya cackles.

Bellinora smiles at Ellanya and then turns to Amanda. “Amanda, did you have any encounters with any *other* creatures, other than lizards, flying creatures and *snakes*?”

Amanda looks to Thian, Tia and Tianna, then back to Bellinora. “Well, I *did* actually. *Several* times... but, the creatures were *people*.”

Both Bellinora and Ellanya gasp. Jasmine stands up focusing *intently* on Amanda, her back arched and the fur standing up on her back.

“You *used* the necklace against... *people*?!” Bellinora asks in horror. “Who? *When*? What did you do?”

Amanda takes them through the events in the village back in the realm of *The Deep Forest Elves*, and *how* she had killed Blaine, but had not *remembered* doing *any* of it, then how she had

fought and *killed* others near Thian's place, and how Josh and *Sam* had showed up. She continued with how she had fought others on their way to the transport chamber, and how she had fought and killed *more* in *The Realm of The Witches*, when they helped with the attack on Anastasia's and Cassandra's village.

"But again," Amanda insists, "I *honestly* don't remember any of it at *all*. One minute I'm looking at something, *scared* half to death, then, I wake up on the *ground* someplace else, and can't remember a *darn* thing. Just like when I woke up on the floor *here*, after you did... *whatever* it is you did to me."

"Yeah, and Amanda's *eyes* are always a different *color* when she does her, uh, *Wielder* thing too, and for a few seconds once she comes to after passing out," Tia says with half a smile.

"*That*," Ellanya says nodding, "is the *power* of the *Artifact* taking over her *nature* for a time. It seems we *may* be right daughter. The *Artifact* is somehow protecting Amanda, but *not* taking her over *completely*. Why, I have *no* idea... *most* interesting."

Jasmine, having settled down, mumbles for several moments, then she, Bellinora and Ellanya turn and look intently at Amanda and the others, as Bellinora says, "Thank you Jasmine. I had *forgotten* you had told me that. Jasmine tells me you had an encounter *prior* to the one in *Shadow Alley*... when you had *first* headed into the village I believe?"

"Oh, *yeah*," Amanda says nodding her head. "Two men had sped past us on either side of the road. *Cassandra*, well, *said* something to them as they passed, and they came back and were going to *hurt* Tianna. I, well, guess I *did* something..."

"So it *was* you!" Cassandra says loudly. "I *knew* it! I *knew* it had to be *one* of you that hung those men upside down and *gagged* them!"

"You did *what* dear?" Ellanya asks Amanda, watching the others smiling.

"Well, again, I really don't *remember* much," Amanda says thinking back to the event. "I remember being really *scared*. They said they were going to teach us all a lesson in *manners*. And they were going to use some kind of *torture* curse on us, and they were going to start with Tianna. That's *all* I remember, other than for a *jolt*, like an electric *current* running through me. The next thing I knew, I was *flat* on my back on the ground. That's when I saw the two men, Jake and *Yarro* hanging upside down at the side of the road. They were *completely* wound in rope, and had some kind of *gags* in their mouths. We then headed off to the village."

"Ah *yes*," Bellinora laughs. "Jake and *Yarro*. I should have guessed. Those two have a *special* talent for either finding, or *causing* trouble wherever they go. Those are two *very* nasty people. Both Jasmine and I have had *run*-ins with them. You were *very* lucky, they *would* have used the torture curse on *each* of you, until you had *all* passed out from the pain. And they do it simply for the *fun* of it."

"It was fortunate you had Amanda with you," Bellinora says shaking her head. "When she feared Tianna, who is a *very* dear friend, was about to be *violently* and painfully attacked, and possibly *killed*, the *Artifact* took over to protect *all* of you. If it were not for the necklace, you would all have suffered *greatly*. And yes, possibly *died* from trauma or heart failure."

Everyone looks nervously at one another, the color draining from their faces.

## The Artifact

[To TOC](#)

“Bellinora?” Tia asks looking confused, “Where did the necklace *come* from? Who *created* it?”

“Yes, perhaps you *should* know the whole story. As much as is *known* that is. Mother, would you like to tell it? You remember it best.”

“Of course dear,” Ellanya says turning to face Amanda and the others.

“Well, *back* in the beginning,” Ellanya begins with a look of concentration, “the necklace was simply known as the *Artifact*.”

“Hundreds of *thousands* of years ago, and some *four* ages before the creation of humankind, when *myths* and legends of today *were* everyday occurrences, two mighty Wizitch families lived. They were the greatest and most *powerful* of their time, and ruled over all of Wizitchdom.

“One family, the *Eleathoans*, known as the *Light*, believed it their duty to help create the ideas and tools that would further their realm and *benefit* the various Wizitch communities. They were great *creators* and thinkers. They were the first to recognize the properties *imbued* in the various trees surrounding their kingdom, and created *wands* from their branches. They mined crystals and *infused* them with special Wizitch attributes.

“One of their *greatest* achievements was to develop the main Wizitch *language*, as well as its derivatives, indigenous to each geographical area, of course, so that travelers would be *instantly* recognized from where they came from. Besides the *spoken* language, they created the first *written* language with elaborate *symbols* containing *Wizitchal* properties, but, sadly, it eventually became *lost* in the vastness of time.

“The other mighty family, the *Dillians*, known as the *Dark*, far older than the Eleathoans, believed that they, *alone*, should rule *all* of Wizitchdom. They believed that those of *Wizitch* kind, should not have *individual* control over Wizitch, as it would result in uncontrolled chaos. They valued *control* and *obedience* over all.

“Those terms, the *Light* and the *Dark*, are used to this very day in the Wizitching realms, to show the *difference* between those who are caring, *creative*, sharing beings, and those who are secretive, *destructive*, controlling and *evil*.

“They disagreed *vehemently* with the Eleathoans beliefs, and declared that *they*, alone, being the *oldest*, should possess a *single* powerful item, that would harness the *full* power of all Wizitch accumulated knowledge, since *time* began and, in *so* doing, would have the Wizitch kingdom acknowledge that *they* ruled supreme, forevermore. Secretly, they decided that anyone attempting to *oppose* them, would be dealt with, and *severely*.

“The two families continued their argument for many years, with no agreement or compromise.

“The Dillians decided that the continuation of *discussions* with the Eleathoans was *useless*, and stealthily began the design of the *one* item, more *powerful* than any individual crystal, more *focused* than any *wand* or staff. It would be a thing of *unbearable* beauty and *infinite* tragedy.

“Those who would look upon it would immediately be filled with *awe* and terror. Its very *existence* would be spoken about in *whispers*, in the dark shadows of night, with dread.

“*One* item, so *breathhtaking*, so *formidable*, that once created would finally *silence* the arguments of the Eleathoans forever.

“With a *zeal* borne of the need to acquire an *overriding* and all-consuming power, the Dillians began their clandestine work, toiling *day* and night in the depths of their most precious

mines until, at last, an object of *incredible* size and beauty was found. It was brought to the Great Elder who exclaimed it, the *One*.

“Work began on it immediately. The Elders studied the gem and determined how it would be cut, what *secret* herb-infused potions it would be *submerged* in, how it would be *polished* and what *rites* would be spoken over it, as it was placed in alternating *blue* and green fires.

“As the gem absorbed the Wizitch spells and *powers* it was given, the Elders needed others to make the gem ready for the *next* generations work. So, at an early age, the *children* were taught to carefully mix and apply the various *potions*, and speak various *spells* over the gem, for the Elder’s continued work.

“Many children *died* as the evil within the One grew and *struck* back, as more and *more* evil was sent into and *trapped* within the gem. The problem became, *how* to control that growing power. But the *need* to entrap *more* evil within the gem, meant more than the *lives* of their children.

“More were sent to take the place of those who perished. And so it went, generation after generation. As each new generation worked on the *Artifact*, as it came to be known, it was molded with ever *greater* detail and infused with more *intense* powers, both *great* and subtle.

“The task of continuing the work on the *Artifact*, passed from Great Elder, to *their* eldest son, who became the *next* Great Elder, and so it went.

“But it’s *true* extent of powers, was realized once the current Great Elder’s daughter, *Eris*, was charged with its final completion. She saw it for the first time as a *child*, taken to it by her father, who instructed her on its further evolution and purpose. She gazed upon it... was *drawn* to it. The other children found her *strange* and kept to themselves. Eris *spoke* to it, and it seemed to others around her, who *heard* her... *answered* it. Many sunrises found her on the floor, curled up in sleep, at the *foot* of the *Artifact*’s work table.

“The *Great* Elder was pleased to find Eris taking such a *dedicated* interest in the *Artifact*’s development - for him. The Great Elder had *no* sons, but was pleased that his *daughter* Eris was just as mean, *cruel*, and *evil*, as any son’s father could ask for.

“As time went on, Eris soon found she had *no* patience with the other children working on the *Artifact*. She deemed them too *clumsy* and slow, but secretly, she felt they were *unworthy* to even gaze upon it, and was driven to a *jealous* rage when anyone other than her, worked on it... *touched* it.

“The servants eyed one another warily whenever they heard children *screaming* from the work room below them. Something, or *someone*, had displeased the Great Elder’s daughter. Eventually, when she was older, she ordered *all* gone. She, *alone*, was the only one *worthy* to see it come to fruition.

“Years passed and, as she grew, her *beauty* became legendary, as was her cunning and *cruelty*. Unwilling servants were *commanded* to bring her food when she worked late into the night, their only reward being a swift *lash* from her spiked belt, or *scalding* tea thrown in their eyes, the price for moving too *slowly*, or interrupting her work.

“She pored over *ancient* texts, that even the *Elders* before her had not *dared* to unseal, to learn the oldest, and most *malevolent* secrets and spells cast throughout the ages, and *secretly* imbued the *Artifact* with those deep, *ancient* evils. Slowly, she became caught in the very webs of evildoing she wove. Many nights it *called* to her when she slept, and she would *come* when it bid her.

“An unknown length of time had elapsed in the *Artifact*’s creation. It was both magnificent and *frightening* to behold. Finally, it was time to show it to the Wizitch kingdom, and make the Eleathoans humble and *cower* before it.

“One day, Eris sent word to her father, the Great Elder, of the *Artifact*’s completion, and he was *eager* to bring all the realms to their *knees*. He demanded the *Artifact* be presented to him the next day, for final inspection. But *Eris* decided, before she would do so, she would imbue it with *three* more powers unbeknown to *anyone* but her: unbroken *longevity* and recognition of others in *their* blood line, as well as others of the most *evil* nature, and those of Light, so that for the former, the *Artifact* would *protect* them against *all* dangers and for the latter, *instant* death should they attempt to take it by force, or even to touch it. And lastly, the ability to *continue* evolving, its power *strengthening* over time, so that, as someone *died* in the presence of the *Artifact*, their *spirit* would be absorbed into it, their *knowledge* to serve the Wielder when needed... for *all* of eternity.”

The kids turn to look at Amanda, who is touching her necklace, her eyes wide with awe and fear.

“Eris slept *badly* that night. The *Artifact* *beckoned* and she sat up in bed suddenly. It was *hers*, commanding her to come and *take* it for her own. But *how*? It was to be presented to her father. He *expected* it, and would *take* it from her for his own, *killing* her if need be. Before the sun rose, she devised a plan.

“The next morning, the Great Elder summoned Eris, who brought the *Artifact* to her father. Taking it from the *wonderfully* carved wooden box with a golden *dragon* carved on the top, along with a strange *symbol* above it, she held it out to him, *reverence* shining on her face. Her father, seeing her veneration, smiled, believing the look was for *him*. As soon as he took the *Artifact*, Eris was *gripped* with an overwhelming envy. Her father, so *stunned* at the power the *Artifact* exuded, never saw the *change* come over her.

“The Great Elder sent messengers to the leaders of all the known realms, near and far, *summoning* them to stand witness to *his* creation in three days’ time. He knew, whether out of curiosity or *fear*, they would not refuse.

“Over the next two days, the Great Elder, accompanied by Eris, would make their way to the highest tower of the castle, and watch as Representatives of the realms, slowly made their way to the grounds surrounding the castle, setting up camps with many tents. In the evening, out of the darkness, small camp fires suddenly flared.

“It was *Eris* who first saw the camp of the Eleathoans, and pointed them out to her father, the *white* flag bearing their family crest waving gently in the evening breeze. A crooked smile spread across her father’s withered face.

“On the morning of the third day, the Great Elder *once* again stood next to Eris. He wore his most *stupendous*, flowing black and gold robe, *covered* with gems of many *gleaming* colors. Looking down on the gathered crowd, he turned his head toward the Representatives of the Eleathoans, excitement growing within him. Using *Wizitch* to magnify his voice, he exclaimed loudly, ‘Welcome all. You have been *summoned* to our home, the home of the *greatest* of the Wizitch families, the *Dillians*.’

“The crowd shifted as murmuring began. There was little *doubt* that they all felt *anger* and insulted at this pronouncement. Representatives from realms, many *eons* older than this realm, came to see the Great Elder out of *respect*, but *not* to be offended. This was the *height* of discourtesy. Only the Eleathoans remained *silent* and unmoved.

“The Great Elder smiled. He turned to Eris and nodded. She opened the carved box, then handed him the *Artifact*, biting her tongue. It was all she could do to *raise* her hand to give it to him. He held out his hand, holding the gem *high* in the air so that all could see his creation *sparkle* in the sunlight. It was a jewel of such an *intense* blood red color that, as the sun caught its many refractions, it seemed to *glow* and pulse with a *life* of its own.

“The crowd below fell silent. ‘You gaze upon that which the *Dillians* have labored over for *many* generations. We have toiled... have *suffered*... generations have *died* to bring this absolute and unique *power* to life.’ The Great Elder looked down upon the crowd, pleased to see their attention *riveted* on his every word.

“‘Through the most ancient, hidden and *forgotten* ways, we have succeeded in *capturing* the spirits of those *Wizitch* kind who, throughout the *eons*, have *proved* themselves to be the most *evil*, the most *vile* and, therefore, the most *powerful* throughout *all* the realms since the times of our most *Ancient* Elders. Oldest and most *terrible* spells... *curses* of unimaginable *dread* are now captured within this *multi-faceted* gem... those spirits *forever* trapped within its core.’

“The effect on the crowd was perfect - *precisely* what he dreamed it would be. All faces were upturned to *him*. ‘As they *will* be forevermore,’ the Great Elder thought, taking great satisfaction in their obvious fear - *all* but the Eleathoans. Only *their* faces remained impassive.

“He continued, his voice *stronger* than before, ‘The *spirits* within wait for the *Wielder* to command them to do *his* bidding! Now, be it known, for *today* and evermore, *I* and *I alone*, am the *Wielder* and *Master* of the *Artifact*! I now claim *authority* over the spirits within, to follow *my* commands, as the *Wielder of Power*!’

“The crowd turned to one another and away from him, speaking among themselves. Many hurried to the Eleathoans and gestured wildly.

“The Great Elder was losing their attention.

“*Rage* filled him at their apparent *contempt* of his words. His face reddened as he bellowed, ‘Witness *now* the power I have *wrought*!’ With the last word, the Great Elder held the gem high and with his other hand, took his wand and *slashed* the air. ‘*Keltieth*’ he roared.

“A flash *shot* out from the wand’s tip with the sound of *thunder*. The air in front of the Great Elder *shimmered* and sparked. It immediately became dense, forming into a *thick* cloud and it smelled as *foul* as decaying flesh.

“The wind *howled* around the Great Elder, his robes billowing high above and behind him. A monstrous *face*, most like a *dragon* with red flames for eyes, formed within the *thunderhead* of the cloud. He cast the wand toward the *crowd* and yelled, ‘Candésen *Brisi*!’ laughing as the face *raced* toward the startled crowd.

“The dragon opened its *flaming* mouth, and blew a *breath* of such intense heat, that people fell to the ground, *screaming*, writhing in pain, their skin *blistering*, bubbling then *blackening*, as their clothes burned from their bodies. *No* one was spared. The screams grew *louder* as people began *clawing* at their flaming faces.

“The Great Elder made another movement with his wand, and the dragon cloud suddenly *turned* and swept low over them once again, blowing a *cold* wind which *extinguished* the flames.

“The screams *slowly* began dying away, turning to moans and *cries* of severe pain. The Great Elder looked down, *exhilarated* at his accomplishment, and *sneered* at the scorched bodies of the Eleathoans.

“‘*You* caused this, *not* I! It was *your* insolence, *your* disrespect for what *we* have accomplished, that brought *this* upon you all!’ The Great Elder raised himself to his full height.

“This is but a *small* demonstration... a *minor* act... of the *power* within the *Artifact*. Go! Go *back* to your kingdoms now, and relay what you have *seen* and experienced. And remember to tell them, that it was *I* who *granted* you continued life. Tell your leaders that the *Dillians*... that *I*... will receive their *complete* allegiance... or they shall *feel* my wrath!

“Look *now* upon the Eleathoans! They, too, *cower* before me! They have *no* power *greater* than mine! Tell one and all... I am the *Wielder* of the *Artifact*! I shall become the *absolute* ruler of all! I am the *Wielder of Power*! Go! *Tell* them!’ and with that, he stormed back into the castle, unaware that *Eris* was no longer there.

“Unseen by her father as he wielded the power of the *Artifact*, Eris moved silently behind him. As he spoke, her *rage* grew so great, that she could *no* longer contain it. When her father declared *himself* to be the *Wielder*, she ran down from the tower and stormed into her room, *slamming* the door behind her. She strode back and forth in her room, hands balled into tight fists, her long nails *digging* into her palms, drawing blood, hardly able to *contain* her fury! The time was coming when she would *have* to act, if she *dared* act at all.

“What the Great Elder had *not* seen, however, was that the Eleathoan’s *clothing* was burnt, but *not* their skin. From countless *dangerous* encounters with the *Dillians* over the centuries, they knew to expect the *worst*, and before setting out, cast *spells* over themselves for protection against *all* manner of known attack. Others had *not* thought to do so, and their suffering was *heartbreaking* to behold. The Eleathoans roamed through the crowds, comforting the burned, administering *healing* salves and balms, along with *spells* to reduce the pain and begin healing the wounds.

“The many Representatives from other realms, grasped the Eleathoans, *thanking* them for their help, and slowly, as the *ministrations* worked, and skin healed and *pain* lessened. Camps were torn down, and those in attendance, began to leave for home.

“Before they left however, the Representatives *begged* the Eleathoans to *do* something. A *malevolent* power had been unleashed, and was now among them. The possibility of the *destruction* of not only their way of life, but *all* life that was of the *Light* in their own realm and that of *all* others, was now a *devastating* reality.

“The Eleathoans realized they were all cowed.

“As the Representatives left, there were backward glances at the *Dillian*’s castle, glances filled with *hate* mingled with unbridled fear.

“The Eleathoan Representatives returned to their kingdom and called for an *emergency* session of the Elders. They told the gathering of all the *horrors* they had witnessed first-hand. The High Elder was *shocked* beyond words.

“His head shaking and his voice filled with sadness, the High Elder finally spoke. ‘There is no *question* that this power *should* not... *must* not... be used in the manner planned for by the *Dillians*.’

“The Eleathoan Elders called for a meeting with the *Dillian* Elders for the following day.

“Yes, it’s true *you* created it,’” said the Elders of the Eleathoans. “‘But *you* only want to use it to *rule* and *control* all *Wizitch* families, and command *all* creatures everywhere - to *enslave* all those of the *Light*.

“‘This *Artifact* is *too* powerful, *too dangerous*, to handle recklessly. Even though you *created* it and it *is* yours by right, *we*, of the *Light*, must now make *claim* to be its steward, so that *none* of *Wizitch* kind, nor *any* other, will come to harm through its *evil* powers.’”

“‘*You* only want to command it for your *own*!’” shrieked Eris. “‘*You* did not mold it! *You* did not *suffer* and *labor* over it! It was not *you* that discovered how to capture the *souls* of the slain,

and *forever* trap their spirits within it! It was not *you* who learned how to *control* many of the spirits within, and yet... *you* want to possess it!”

“The Eleathoans countered, ‘*You* only want it so that it will *fuse* your powers in the minds of our *Wizitch* kind, and make *yourselves* the undisputed rulers of *all* kingdoms, through *torture* and cruelty, through the *pain* and suffering of others, and possibly *extinguishing* the Light forever!’

“‘*You* will *never* keep it! *You* shall *never* use its *horrible* powers for your own end! To that, we give our *oath*! Either *we* keep it safe, *never* to be used, or it must be *destroyed*!’

“The argument raged on with no relief. Even though the Eleathoans had the support from *most* all the other realms, the Dillians *refused* to relinquish or destroy the *Artifact*.

“At the end of a particularly *rancorous* exchange between the two great families, Eris realized what she needed to do. That night, she changed the plan she had originally devised. She locked herself in the *Artifact*’s work room, and only spoke to her *father* when commanded. She told him her new plan, but kept the *last* part to herself.

“With the Dillians refusal to turn the *Artifact* over to the Eleathoans, the Eleathan Elders debated what to do. Rumors had come to them, of the *Artifact* causing *torture* and even *death* in far off realms, for not pledging their *complete* allegiance to the Great Elder. Representatives from many realms came to them, *begging* for help and protection.

“The Eleathoans decided to try *one* last time, to *reason* with the Great Elder, but they soon found there *was* no reasoning. It was as though he had become the *embodiment* of the most fearsome qualities of the *Artifact* itself.

“That night, the High Elder of the Eleathoans broached the subject of *taking* the *Artifact* from the Dillians through *stealth*.

“Now, you need to know that, at *this* point in time, this *concept* had *never* before been considered in *all* of *Wizitchdom*. There was never a *need*, let alone the *thought*, to treat another *Wizitch* with anything other than deep *love* and respect, even when there were *vast* disagreements.

“But the existence of the *Artifact* changed *everything*. The Eleathoans were *convinced* of this, each time they met with the Dillian leaders.

“After anguished days and *nights* of arguments, *counter*-arguments and rebuttals, the inescapable *truth* could no longer be denied. The *Artifact* was *already* being used as a deadly power over others, and they knew the Dillians would not stop, until they had *total* and complete control over *all* living things. The more the Great Elder of the Dillian’s *used* the *Artifact*, and learned to *control* the powers of the few spirits within, the *darker* his uses became. The power he felt when using the *Artifact*, was *driving* him to use it *more* and more often, and with more *horrific* results. He was *testing* its powers, and his abilities to control *more* spirits at one time. The Eleathoans knew it was up to *them* alone, to stop the Dillians from *destroying* all that was Light and beautiful.

“The plan was formulated, *rejected*, re-structured and debated *time* and time again. It was simply *unheard* of to *take* something from another *without* permission. They were unsure at first, how to even *carry* out such a plan.

“A fortnight had passed since the fateful demonstration of the *Artifact*’s powers. Ambassadors from many realms came to the Eleathoans nightly, telling them of the *terror* of the *Artifact*, and how it was being *tested* or used, usually upon unsuspecting villagers.

“One night, a runner came with news that brought all who listened to a deeper dread. ‘The *Artifact*,’ he whispered, ‘is being *changed*. It is *no* longer to be but a *single*, deadly jewel.’ It was told that the Great Elder’s daughter, was not *satisfied* with the power contained within the *one*

jewel of the *Artifact*. She wanted *more*. She had begun the design of a *necklace*, in which the *Artifact* would rest, to become one jewel, *eventually* among others. The runner told of the recent *murder* of thirty innocent people by the daughter... their crime, being that she judged them to be of a *lessor* Wizitch kind. 'But,' the runner continued, his voice shaking in terror, 'everyone knows it is because she was testing *her* control of the *One*. She had convinced her father to let *her* use the *Artifact*, to *test* its powers, so should something unforeseen happen, *he*... the Great Elder... would *not* be harmed. He had refused at first, but then, for some *unknown* reason, relented.'

"The Eleathoans sent out scouts to see if the rumors were true, and to see for themselves what horrors they may find. And so it came back to them that their *worst* fears were indeed realized. The *Artifact* was *still* separate from the necklace, and there was no *knowledge* of any other jewels yet formed, but the creation of the *metal* portion of the necklace... *had* begun.

"The High Elders of the Eleathoans renewed their final plan. There would be *no* turning back or, they knew that *all* would be *lost* to the Dark.

"The night finally came when the plan would be executed. The High Elder's son, his *only* child, Liam, agreed to travel to the Dillians, find and *take* the *Artifact*, and bring it home for safe keeping... *never* to be used by anyone.

"Liam was a young man of *eighteen* summers, and was especially loved by all who knew him. He did not know *how* to lie, nor was it in his nature to *harm* any other living thing, unless it would do harm to *him* first. This made his task an exceptionally *difficult* one, but one he realized *must* be done for the good of *all* creatures everywhere.

"He lived in a cottage near the castle, never needing or desiring the service from servants and, after meeting with his father to finalize the plans, donned his traveling clothes and took a large black bag with him. He returned to the castle and was given special blessings for a safe journey by his father. The High Elder walked him to the door and held his shoulders. 'Be *careful*, my son. Come *back* to me. I will not *sleep* well until I know you are safe.' As Liam left, he waved and smiled goodbye to all. He set out showing far more *courage* than he felt.

"Liam had been traveling by foot for three days because, at that time, there *were* no Wizitched brooms. They had not been *invented* yet. On the third day, Liam suddenly heard two voices nearby. He quickly looked around for someplace to hide, saw a large *tree* and made his way quietly to it. He placed a hand against its huge and scarred trunk, closed his eyes and *spoke* to it with his mind. Slowly, the great tree lowered its branches and *hid* Liam from view.

"The voices grew *louder* and he soon saw two young men passing near him, obviously *Dillians* from the style of their clothing. They were laughing roughly, about the young Wizitch family *tortured* into doing the hard work previously assigned to *them*.

"It gradually grew dark and, as no one else passed him, Liam felt secure as he rested below the tree and ate some leaves and bread he brought with him. As he ate, he remembered his father's words. 'The *Artifact* will be where it can *easily* be seen, and *experienced* by those to be frightened or *worse*. There will be *no* protection around it, for it would be unnecessary. They will not *fear* that it will be stolen, for no such *word* or action in *all* of time, has *ever* occurred before.'

"He could not help but shiver with the task he was about to do.

"The evening stars smiled on him from high above, but even *their* beauty could not assuage Liam's nervousness. He wanted this to be *over*, and *never* have to see the dreaded *Artifact* ever again. Little did Liam know, that within the week, his *wish* would be granted.

"Knowing he could not put it off any longer, Liam whispered a word of thanks to the tree, which slowly lifted its branches away from him.

“He did not have to travel long to find the Dillian’s castle. He heard the raucous laughter and *shouts* coming from it before he saw it. Emerging through the trees, he crouched down behind a large boulder and waited, waited until the candles in each room were eventually extinguished. Sometime later, silently, he *crept* up to the triple door front and asked it to open, using a *long* lost universal spell, which I *believe*,” Ellanya says turning her head to Amanda, “Amanda has *since*, uncovered...”

Everyone turns to Amanda, knowing she has used the word *Orathian*, a word *so* ancient that neither Bellinora *nor* Ellanya had known it. Amanda nods nervously.

Ellanya smiles then continues. “The doors silently swung open and Liam entered cautiously.

“His attention was *immediately* drawn to strange, *pulsing* lights, coming from an adjoining room. He walked slowly toward it, and saw a small box placed upon a pedestal, in front of one of the *immense* windows on the side of the castle. His heart *pounded* the closer he walked.

“Rays of brilliant *greens*, that reminded him of a new blanket of freshly sprouted grass as it flirted with the sky, played against the walls. The brilliant green color *countered* with a deep, *putrid* greenish-yellow, reminiscent of *pus* that infects a wound. Swirling through the hypnotic greens were *reds*, brilliant as the first bright *cherries* of the summer, then devolved into a red that pulsed with an *insatiable* hunger, and *promised* the threat of doom.

“Liam’s breath *caught* in his throat, as he stood mesmerized by the movement of lights coming from the item, placed in a *velvet*-lined box atop the pedestal.

“He looked down at the *Artifact* but *closed* his eyes quickly, *nauseated* by what he felt. He closed the lid and secured the latch. The wave of relief was instantaneous. Looking at the golden *dragon* carved upon the lid of the box, he *puzzled* over the strange symbol above the dragon’s head. A *crack* from the fireplace in the other room, *startled* him back to his task.

“He looked around quickly as he drew out his large black bag. He placed the box into the bag, tied it shut with a *golden* cord, then secured it to his belt. Turning, his foot *bumped* against the pedestal in the darkened room, making it rock. His heart threatened to *jump* out of his chest as he *clutched* the swaying pedestal tightly, as it threatened to fall. His arms shook with every second. An *eternity* passed as he held his breath, daring not to breathe. Sweat *trickled* into his eyes, burning them. Not sensing anyone had been alerted, Liam released the pedestal, turned and moved as *quickly* as he could out the door and across the lawn, into the *safety* of the trees beyond.

“Days later, Liam’s heart *raced* with happiness as he finally saw the lights of his home. Liam ran through the castle’s doors and into the front room. The huge room was *filled* with his family and friends, many having never *left*, all waiting for his return. Liam quickly untied the black bag and held closed box up, a look of *triumph* on his face.

“His father stood, then ran to him, *rejoicing* in his safe return. The Eleathoans *cheered* his success. His father *knew* what this act had cost his son, and was *especially* proud of his achievement. ‘For your courage and *bravery*, you have the *great* honor to hide and *protect* the *Artifact*.’

“Every day, Eris rose *early* to gaze upon her creation, and that which was to come. The morning after Liam *took* the *Artifact*, Eris entered the anteroom before the sun rose, and stopped when she saw the box was *gone*. Confused, she searched the area and discovered a bit of leather *strap* at the base of the pedestal the box had rested atop. She recognized the *workmanship* of the leather. Clutching the strap *tightly* in her hand, with wonder *dawning* in her eyes, she realized the *deception* that had been committed against them, against... *her*.

“Her *screams* of rage woke the rest of the castle. The Great Elder raced downstairs and saw the box missing. Eris held up the strap. ‘The *Eleathoans*,’ she hissed.

“It took the Great Elder several moments to comprehend what *treachery* had taken place. *Nothing* like this had ever *happened* before - not in *all* the annals of time.

“The Great Elder called a meeting, and Eris presented the *proof* of her contentions.

“‘The Eleathoans have grown *too* powerful,’ the Great Elder said. ‘They have *taken* without permission, that which is *not* theirs! A treachery befitting that of *our* creation, yes, but for *them* to have *thought* of such a thing! No. They have indeed become *too* powerful! It is time to *act*!’”

“‘They *must* be punished!’” Eris said, her voice venomous.

“‘We must have it *back*, *whatever* the cost. Let *none* stand in your way. Do you understand my daughter?’” her father asked, looking at her.

“Eris nodded and, heart *pounding*, went back to her room to prepare for her journey. She tied her long black hair back, and wrapped the top of her head with a *black* scarf. She took a second black scarf and wrapped it over her nose. She swirled her *pitch* black robes around her, so that only her bright *green* eyes stared back at her from the mirror. She took her short, curved, *silver* blade and put it into its leather sheath, which fitted across her chest. She looked at her reflection and closed her eyes, feeling the *blood* lust flood through her. She opened her eyes, stepped outside, and as if she were a shadow, *melted* into the night.

“Liam’s tracks were *easy* to follow. He had not *thought* to conceal them, for there had never been a *need*, but to Eris, feeding off her *own* feelings, it showed his *arrogance* to her, not even *bothering* to hide his treachery.

“She traveled quickly, *revenge* urging her on, only slowing to drink or eat some dried meat. She saw four sunrises before she realized she was there. The Eleathoan’s castle rose up before her, *glimmering* in the rays of the new moon. She fought the desire to *race* up the stairs and *slaughter* everyone inside. She stood still for a moment, giving her pounding heart a chance to settle.

“She looked down at the tracks again and followed them to the *massive* front doors, but her attention became riveted by the *same* tracks, moving *away*. ‘Whoever it was came here *first*, *days* ago,’ she thought, ‘then went’... and turned to look in a new direction.

“Keeping low, she followed the tracks away from the castle and found they came to the front door of a small cottage. She rose slowly and looked through an open window then *dropped* quickly. She had seen him before. She recognized the *High* Elder’s son sleeping in his bed. Her blood *raced* inside her. ‘*Liam*,’ she said quietly to herself, *venom* in each syllable. ‘*You* took it away from me!’ She rose to look at him again, but this time, she did not drop down.

“Walking to the front door, she smiled as she reached for the door handle. She already *knew* it would not be locked. She pushed the door open and *listened* to see if he stirred. Hearing nothing, she moved inside and waited as her eyes adjusted to the dark. Stealthily, she moved further in, *inching* closer to him. When he moved his arm off his chest, she *froze*. First one foot, then another, she quietly advanced and looked down at him, fury *raging* in her heart.

“All thought was on *revenge* as she slid the small knife out from its sheath. Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, the moon sent a ray of light through the window, landing on a *glass*-topped table in the corner. As she turned her head, her breath *caught* in her throat. *There* on the table, was the *box*.

“Without another thought, she moved quickly to it. She quietly placed the knife on the table and with shaking hands, ran her finger over the odd *symbol* above the dragon’s head and smiled.

She raised the lid. The *Artifact* pulsed to life and covered her face with its *deadly* rays. It had been *waiting* for her. 'I am here,' she breathed to it.

"Looking back over her shoulder, she saw Liam sleeping soundly. Her eyes stopped at a chair near his bed, and saw *clothing* draped over the back. On the floor, were his shoes. Walking to the chair, she took from her pocket a strap of leather. Kneeling, she saw that only *one* of his shoes had a *new* strap. The *same* type of strap she now held.

"Hot blood *raced* through her as she put the strap back in her pocket. Standing, she walked over to the table and picked up her knife, a ray of moonlight *glinting* off the sharp silver blade. Stealthily, she walked to Liam's bed and stood next to him. About to *kill* him while he slept, she hesitated. 'No, not like *this*...' she thought. She wanted him to *know* it was her.

"'*Liam*,' she said. He slept deeply. '*Liam*,' she called louder. He stirred and rubbed his eyes, then slowly opened them. At first, he smiled at her, not realizing who she was. She waited.

"His eyes, focusing on her, grew *large* and as he started to sit up, she *struck*, bringing the knife quickly to his *throat*, and in one quick, *practiced* stroke, *severed* the jugular. Liam did not seem to understand what just happened. He looked at her, eyes confused, *questioning*.

"Eris, warm blood *spurting* over her, smiled down on him, waiting to see the *life* leave him. Liam frantically grabbed at his throat, trying to staunch the bleeding. He tried to talk, and as he did so, Eris pulled the black scarf down from her mouth, bending *close* to him. He began to gag on his own blood, *fighting* to take a breath. As his body began to convulse, Eris grabbed his shoulders with her hands and, after breathing out *fully*, placed her mouth tightly over Liam's and breathed in as *deeply* as she could, pulling the *last* bit of life from his lungs, her eyes *never* leaving his. When his eyes were at last *empty* of light, and he lay still, she pulled away from him, wiped the *blood* from her mouth, and pulled the black scarf up over her nose. Taking the shoe strap from her pocket, she *threw* it on his lifeless body, and moved to the table.

"Eris *lovingly* took the *Artifact* from the box, and moved back to Liam. Holding the jewel over his body, she spoke softly the spell her *father* had taught her years ago... the one that would snatch the *soul* of the slain and *trap* it within the jewel, to *forever* obey the Wielder's every command.

"This would be the *ultimate* insult to the Light. A thin wisp of *silver-blue* mist rose from Liam, bent toward, and was *absorbed* into the *Artifact*.

"Eris was *avenged*.

"And now, finally, Eris could fulfill the *last* part of her plan. Gently, she placed the *Artifact* back within the carved wooden box, *latched* it, and placed her index finger on the *strange* symbol as she smiled.

"She left the cottage, closing the door behind her and traveled, *not* to her home kingdom, but to a place of her *own* choosing, to create that which would *always* be hers. She felt the *unfinished* necklace in her cloak, where soon, she would *mount* the *Artifact*, so *she* could wear it, casting a spell so it would *never* leave her, until her eventual *death* of natural causes. Unless... she could *somehow* overcome even *that*.

"You see, throughout all these very long years, *Eris*, the one who had finalized the *Artifact*'s creation so long ago, had *burned* with the desire to possess the *Artifact* for herself. Her own greed became *too* great to control, or the power of those *trapped* within the gem, so strong, they began to *overtake* her. Who is to know? But, what we *do* know is, Eris is known to have brought great *death*, destruction and *terrors* too horrible to describe, to a great *many*, and on a good *number* of realms. Then, for *some* reason, she was never *heard* from again.

“Rumor tells us however, the *Artifact* was *eventually* placed into a *magnificent* golden necklace, to become part of what is now, a *ruby* red heart, *cradled* between two *emerald* hands. It is said that Eris had worked in *secret* for many years, traveling from wherever she had gone, coming out on occasion to *test* the new powers of her finished necklace. It is said that she had chosen a *new* Wielder as she was dying from old age, and that after she *had* died, the *new* Wielder took over and spread terror for *many* years.

“We have no idea *how* many Wielders there have actually been over the centuries, but, *Alistar*, Josh and Sam’s son, was *hot* on the trail of the last known one. He, *and* the Wielder, were never *heard* from again, and the *necklace* had been lost in time - until *you* found it Amanda, becoming the *new* Wielder.

“But back to the story. When Eris did not return to the Dillian kingdom, her father, the *Great Elder*, became *convinced* that the Eleathoans had *killed* her, and kept the *Artifact* for themselves, *hiding* it forever, or possibly, now using it *themselves* in secret. Thus began the *seven-thousand* year war of the *two* most powerful Wizitch families - the Eleathoans were sure that the *Dillians* murdered Liam, while the Dillians were convinced the Eleathoans *murdered* their daughter and *refused* to return her body to them. They absolutely *knew* the Eleathoans hid her body with the *Artifact*.

“So you see, the *Artifact* was gone, *neither* family having it, while *both* were convinced the other possessed it.

“Bellinora, *Jasmine* and myself, believe that it was *Eris* who began the creation of what is known as, the *Great Book of Power* and hid its location. We do not know if it was *she*, or *another* who actually finished the book, or even if it *had* ever been finished. We believe she also was the one who created the *original* stone tablet, which she, or perhaps her *successor* or successors, *shattered* into what is known today as, *The Thirteen Shards of Legend*, and which she or one of the *latter* Wielders, had *hidden* throughout the *foulest* of places... the *Dark Forest*. However, we *do* know that at least *some* of the shards have been moved, to other places, even to other *realms* over the ages.

“We also believe that the *skeleton* which Amanda found in the cave, is that of the *last Wielder of Power*, having finally *completed* the creation of the necklace and *wore* it, but never having learned to fully *command* its powers, or *none* of us would be here today. For we believe, that she, or *he*, had finished formulating *how* to form all the spirits *trapped* within the jewels, into *one* mighty spirit, of which, should one be able to *control* it, could *never* be killed, other than through natural causes... we *think*.

“And, it is said, that she, or *he*, wrote in the *Great Book of Power*, a way to take the necklace off, so they could further *work* on it, or perhaps, even add *more* jewels of power to it. But something *stopped* them from proceeding and using the powers within the *Great Book of Power*.

“We think that somehow, *Alistar* found them, and somehow *trapped* them, within the mountain they had fled to. Josh told us, that Alistar had *tracked* the Wielder, and had found an entrance to a *mountain*, although he had not stated its *location* nor where he had found the *bones* of the long dead, along with *mounds* of armor, some dating back *hundreds* of thousands of years.

“He stated that he *thought* this place was where *several* Wielders had made their base of operations, where they could *continue* to work in secrecy. Then, Josh and Sam lost *contact* with him. Both *he* and the Wielder had become *lost* through the ages, and no further *terrors* were experienced on the many known realms.

“Exactly when and *how* all these things happened, we have no idea. But it seems that, since *Amanda* had found many skeletons, as well as a large *pile* of armor, much of which is *millennia* old, the *necklace* had been *lost* within a mountain within the *earth* realm, for time unknown.

“We indeed believe that *this* is where Eris made her home, *someplace* within the mountain where Amanda found the bones and the necklace. Many had *tried* to find Eris and the other Wielders over *thousands* of years, and the piles of *bones* and stacks of armor, tell us that *many* had found her, *or* her successors, but *perished*. You must remember, that in the *early* days of many realms, one could live for many *thousands* of years, as many *trees* do yet today. But there is no way to know *who* it was you found with the necklace, Amanda.

“Of course, after many years, it *eventually* came to light that the *Eleathoans* did not steal the necklace as had been *portrayed* throughout the centuries by the Dillians, but instead had been taken by the Great Elder’s own *daughter*, who was eventually *overcome* by its own evil properties, *herself* becoming the *first Wielder of Power*.

“Over the great passage of time, the *horrors* of the *Necklace of Power* and the one who wears it, known as the *Wielder of Power*, have fallen into *legend* and myth. Stories are *still* told about them today, but few believe there is any *truth* in them.

“The *Necklace of Power* had fallen from the *horrors* of reality, to become *nothing* more than stories told around campfires, to *scare* and entertain children. All the while, the real *Necklace of Power* lay *safely* within the ancient mountain tunnels of the *earth* realm, where the *Wielder of Power* had *somehow* fallen. There, in the *dark* of the mountain, the *Artifact*, a *completed* necklace, as we now see... *waited*, until one who was *never* meant to find or *possess* it, happened along, and through the *strangest* and most *unlikely* of events, was able to *pick* it up, and place it around her neck, not knowing *what* she had done.

“Amanda is now, and will *remain* to the end of her days, the most *powerful* being in *all* the known universes. For Amanda now wears the *Necklace of Power*. Soon, she will *lose* her own identity, and simply become known as... the *Wielder of Power*.

“That is more or less the tale, as *best* I can tell it.”

No one speaks for a full minute, then, “Well, I wish I had *never* found it,” Amanda says shaking her head. “It really *scares* me when I use it... or, well, I guess when *it* uses me, and I end up *doing* things I don’t even *remember* doing. I didn’t want to *kill* those people. And I didn’t know I *had*, until I came to and *Thian* and the others told me what I had done. I just *want* this thing off! There *has* to be a way!”

Bellinora, Jasmine and Ellanya begin to speak among themselves, when Bellinora stops and says, “Listen, I would like to have a talk with *Jasmine* and Ellanya, and it may take a good while. Why don’t you kids go into the village, have something to *eat* and look around a little more?”

Bellinora waves her hand and a bag *filled* with coins appears on the little table to the side of Amanda. “There is *plenty* there for all of you. And *please*... stay *out* of *Shadow Alley*.”

“Oh, don’t *worry*!” Amanda says with a laugh, “we’ve had quite *enough* excitement for a while, thank you *very* much! Oh, and thanks so much for the *money*, we’ll only use what we need. Oh and that *reminds* me... Wind Rider, I mean, *Melteme*, after helping us, said he hopes you’ll invite him for another *tasty* meal of your *fabulous* Stew.”

Bellinora laughs, “Oh he *did*, did he? Well, it would be *my* honor. And let me tell you, that man can *eat*!” They all laugh.

“Well, again, thanks for the money, we didn’t bring much of our own. Kind of had to *leave* in a hurry,” Amanda says.

“It is *my* pleasure, dear,” Bellinora says with a big smile. “Now *run* along, and *please* try to stay out of *trouble*,” looking sternly at Cassandra, who flushes and turns away.

“Oh, and Amanda,” Ellanya says quickly. “Better put that *necklace* back beneath your robe. There are some who may *recognize* it from their various studies.”

Amanda slips the necklace beneath her robe as the others get up, and while Amanda puts the bag of coins into her pant’s pocket, Thian and the others go to grab their brooms.

Once back, they say good bye, and head out of the cave. Outside, they mount up and head for the village, all looking *forward* to something to eat, and to look around and try to *relax* a little.

Anastasia and Cassandra fly a good distance behind the others, chatting quietly, which suits *Tianna* and the others just fine.

## Cassandra's Mistake

[To TOC](#)

The kids enter the village and head to the Broom Closet to store their brooms. Sadie once again does her thing to dirty them up a bit, so they will blend in. Once Sadie is finished, Thian rubs his hands together asking, "Well... *where* to? Bellinora's sandwiches were good and all, but, I could sure go for a big juicy *burger* and an ice cold drink!"

They all laugh. Cassandra says, "Hey... how about that little *pub* we saw near *Shadow Alley*?"

"What? Are you *nuts*?" Tianna snorts. "We're *not* going back into *Shadow Alley*!"

"It's not *in Shadow Alley*," Cassandra sneers.

Turning to Thian, with a tone sweet as honey, she asks, "*Remember?* It was the place we passed with all the great *smells* of burgers and stuff. It's the one *you* wanted to go into before we went into *Shadow Alley*. It's *next* to the Alley, but not *in* it. It's kind of out of the way too, so maybe we could get some *good* tables. After all, there are *seven* of us, and Wind Rider got rid of those *horrible* men."

They talk it over for a few moments as their stomachs begin to growl. Thian says, "Okay. Come on, let's just *go* there Tianna. If we don't like what we see inside, we can just go someplace else. There are *lots* of people here in the main village, and being *strangers*, we may get more attention than we *want* if we stay around here."

Tianna does not like it - mainly because it had been *Cassandra's* idea and not hers. But she does remember the smells, and it *is* out of the way. And after all, how could something *possibly* happen to them *twice* in the same place, so... "Okay, sure, why *not*? Like you said, if we don't like it..." then looking sternly at Cassandra, "we'll *leave*."

Sadie claps and grabs Tianna's hand and begins pulling her along after her. This breaks the tension among them, as everyone laughs and heads off after them.

They make their way through the village, nodding nervously to passersby. They even see a few folks they recognize from yesterday, when they had their little *adventure* in *Shadow Alley*. Walking for several more minutes, far from the nicer shops, they spot the pub and can already smell the cooking.

When they step up to the pub, they once again read the filthy sign over the door, "The Rat Hole Brew Pub & Eatery. 'Eat 'til You Bust!'" They walk up the stairs and look in through the dirty windows.

The lights are low and smoke is everywhere, making it hard to see much of the inside at all. As they enter, they see the blue and grey smoke hangs in the air like fog on a marshland, curling around the small lanterns on the walls, one above each table, or around the candles on the tables scattered around the main portion of the room.

From *strange* curved pipes to long rolled leaves, the air is *filled* with contrasting aromas. The leaves and stems being inhaled add to the enticing and *mouth-watering* smells coming from the kitchen, located in a side room, just behind the bar.

The main room is larger than it appeared from the outside. The room curves around in the back to the right, out of sight from the main area. There are small candles stuck in old glass cups on the tables, giving meager illumination.

The floor is *covered* with feathers, ash and the remainders of what was smoked.

Occasionally, under a table, you can see a small animal's *severed* head sticking out, blood still oozing from its neck, the *loser* of a bet between animal traders.

The Pub is open day and night, always crowded with travelers from *Darkwoods Village* and those going to and coming from *Shadow Alley* and the surrounding communities. The majority of traders and merchants have dirty, *smear*ed faces. They crowd around the circular and triangular tables, eating, *drinking* and telling stories of their adventures and near escapes on other realms. They order food by placing their hand on a yellow circular glowing spot in the center of the table. Once they place their hand on the spot, the kitchen Wizitches their food to them.

They keep their *creatures* under the table in cages or on ropes.

For those who want a more *private* atmosphere, they are shown to tables in one of several rooms, separated from the main dining area by an arched partition. These much *darker* areas have an exit door in each, in case a *hasty* exit is needed. It is much darker and *quieter* in the back as well, even though it *is* just as crowded.

For those who want to be left alone, they are taken to small booths that line the walls. There, they can use curtain separating them from the rest of the inhabitants - a better place to plan *whatever* those not wanting to be seen or heard are contriving.

But the most *interesting* and popular area of the Pub is the *bar*. The bar runs the length of the building on the left as you enter. Its special feature is its glowing top. All along the surface are circular areas that glow *blue* and red. A customer steps to the bar and places their hand on a red area, then steps back as a stool, fitted for their height and weight appears. Once they are seated, they touch a *blue* glowing area and the bar server instantly knows what drink to serve them.

As someone enters, heads turn toward the new visitor and *decisions* are made. At least *fifty* pairs of eyes and another twenty *individual* eyes, meet each person.

Someone comes from behind the bar as you enter, and asks what type of *business* you have. That will determine where you are seated. Once seated, most in the pub turn away and go back to their own wants.

When the kids enter, they are surprised to see that the place is almost *packed*. There are several *shady* looking characters chatting at one end of the bar, who turn with sour faces and glare at them. Most of the tables are taken, but they spot *two* tables next to each other which will seat four people each. These tables are up against a *partition* to another small room, which looks full.

“Wow,” Thian says as they head to the far side of the room, to their tables. “They must have *really* great food here. The place is *packed*!”

They reach their tables and everyone sits down. Amanda, Thian, Tianna and Sadie take one table, while Tia, Anastasia and Cassandra take the other.

Cassandra takes the seat next to the opening in the partition to the next room. Anastasia takes a seat on one side of her, with Tia sitting next to Anastasia, with her back to where Thian is seated. There are menus on the tables and everyone begins looking them over eagerly, while keeping an *eye* on the other patrons... *all* of whom look as though they have just *escaped* from prison and turn to look at the kids from time to time, scowling with suspicion.

Everyone orders and finds that they have to pay for their orders *before* they get them. Thian guessed they did this, because too many customers *leave* without paying.

They chat until their meals come, which everyone *thoroughly* enjoys. Thian notes rather loudly, “Best darn *burger* I’ve ever had... and that’s *saying* something, if I *do* say so myself.”

There is music playing from something which reminds Amanda of the Jukebox’s back on earth. She watches as a woman drops a coin into a slot and pushes a button on the lighted, bubbling, odd-shaped contraption. A new lively tune begins, and they all start to nod their heads and tap their feet in time to the beat.

Throughout the meal, everyone chats in hushed voices about what had gone on earlier. *Cassandra* of course, talking not only in her normal speaking voice, but *much* louder than normal, and *far* louder than the rest liked, with Tia *constantly* telling her to keep her voice down or *change* the subject.

They all relax, enjoying the music and taking an occasional sip from their drinks. Sadie then asks Tianna, “Can we look around the village some more? There’re *lots* of places we haven’t seen yet. And Bellinora said she wanted to talk to Ellanya and *Jasmine* for a while by themselves anyway. Can we? *Please!*”

Tianna smiles. “Sure. That sounds like *fun*. But first, I think you had better wipe the *orange* sauce from your burger, *off* your nose.” Sadie giggles while wiping her nose. Tianna asks Thian and Amanda if they would like to join them. They both say yes and get up.

Tia, overhearing, says she would like to go along too, and asks Anastasia and Cassandra to come along. Cassandra says no, that she wants to just sit and listen to the music for a while longer, and chat with Anastasia.

Thian, Tia, Tianna, Sadie and Amanda all say they will meet them under the *huge* tree in the village square in about an hour. They get up to leave and look around the village, leaving Cassandra and Anastasia alone at their table.

“*Finally!* I was beginning to think we’d *never* be alone!” Cassandra says with a heavy sigh. Then speaking loudly to be heard over the blaring music, “I’ve been *dying* to ask you if you *knew* Amanda had found what Bellinora called the *Necklace of Power*, and who is *now* the new *Wielder of Power?*”

“No. I had *no* idea at all. It’s still hard to believe she found it on the *earth* realm, and *did* all the things she did. And *Bellinora*, Jasmine and Ellanya believe *everything* she told us too.”

“I know,” Cassandra says after taking a sip of her drink. “I mean, fighting *frilled* lizards, *giant* snakes, and those *flying* things. Bellinora said those were all protecting the way to that ancient *transport* chamber Amanda found.

“If *we* knew *exactly* where those ancient transport chambers were, *we* could travel to other realms... and we wouldn’t need *permits* or anything either! Nobody would *ever* know how we left or how we *got* someplace else. I want to see if we can somehow get that *map* she has. You know, the one Amanda has that tells *where* everything is back on earth?”

“Cassa, it’s *illegal* to travel without a permit or permission. If we were *caught*, we’d be in *big* trouble. They put people in *prison* for that you know. It *would* be fun though, to see other realms and all. And to think that Amanda found it by *accident* after all the *other* things she did and found!”

“Yeah! And Bellinora said it was the power of the *necklace* that helped Amanda *kill* that man in the realm of *The Deep Forest Elves*. What was his name? *Blaine* wasn’t it? Anyway, when Thian told us how Amanda had been hit *again* and again with *killing* curses... and they just *burst* into harmless sparks in front of her... *Wow!*

“And then she used some *really* powerful spell and turned Blaine to *stone*! I didn’t know there *was* a spell that could do *that!*”

“I know,” Anastasia said very excitedly too. “But, *Bellinora* said Amanda *got* that spell from that ancient *book* she found.”

“Yeah. Can you believe Amanda actually found *The Lost Book Of The Dillian’s*? After its being lost all these *centuries?*” Cassandra says loudly. “And Bellinora wants to *destroy* it! Not if *I* can help it! I’m gonna see if *I* can get it first!

“And what about all the *other* people Thian and the others saw her *kill*, and she can’t even *remember* any of it? Or so she *says*. I *still* don’t believe she can’t remember *anything* though. I mean really... wouldn’t *you* remember if you had killed, like over a *dozen* people and you’re only *thirteen* years old? I bet whoever this wizard called *Taldan* is, was *really* ticked off when his apprentice... *Morpheus* wasn’t it... showed back up, and had to tell him all his *other* apprentices had been killed. The thing is though... we *both* saw Amanda do some *amazing* flying, when they showed up here in our realm. And, *what* about all those things Amanda did in Bellinora’s *cave*, when they were *testing* her? That was *awesome*!”

“Yeah, it really was,” Anastasia says quietly. “But I really feel *sorry* for Amanda... don’t you?”

“Are you *kidding*? If I had found the *Necklace of Power*... I could have *anything* I wanted... and *would* too! They said that whoever wore the *Necklace of Power*, would be known as the *Wielder of Power*. And once they get that *Great Book of Power* they talked about, could *never* be killed, and could rule *every* realm in *all* the universes we know of!

“And to think that Amanda, who says she *isn’t* a witch or wizard, and has never had *any* training at all in Wizitch, is the one who accidentally *found* it. She’s only around *our* age after all. Bellinora and Ellanya are really *worried* too, since *no* one like Amanda was ever meant to *wear* the necklace.

“They said they have *no* idea if she can control it... or if *it* will control her. They even think she could actually still be *killed*, because she doesn’t know how to *use* it yet. Just think... if somebody *kills* her, and *takes* the necklace, *they* could be the most *powerful* creature throughout *all* the universes, and *never* be killed.” Then looking thoughtfully for a moment says, “Of course, she could have a horrible *accident* and die too, you know. I wonder...”

At that moment, two hooded men quickly come around the corner of the partition. One *snatches* Cassandra right up out of her chair, knocking it clattering to the side, as she lets out a *scream* of surprise. The other man makes his way quickly around the fallen chair. He tries to grab Anastasia, but she leaps aside and grabs a chair. When he reaches for her, she straightens up, swinging it hard and *cracking* him across the face, sending him *sprawling* onto floor.

Both Cassandra and Anastasia are *screaming* for help. Seeing that no one in the Pub wants to get involved, Anastasia turns to look at Cassandra. Cassandra is *kicking* and screaming, held tightly by the other man. Cassandra *screams* to Anastasia to go for help. Anastasia spins around and *bolts* for the exit

“*Leave* her!” The one holding the struggling Cassandra yells to his fallen friend. He then pulls his wand and *waves* it over his head. He and Cassandra *vanish*. The other man scrambles to his feet, looking *very* angry. While holding his bleeding forehead and *broken* nose with one hand, he quickly draws his wand, waves it over his head and disappears.

The others within the pub had *all* turned to see what was happening, many getting to their feet *ready* for a fight, hands on their wands, but *no* one had raised a hand to help.

In *Witch Mountain*, you do *not* interfere unless you are willing to *die* yourself. In a moment, seeing that the commotion is over, everyone simply goes back to their own business, as though *nothing* had happened at all.

Anastasia runs from the building *screaming* for help. Many people turn to look at her, but no one comes to her aid. Most look at her, then *quickly* turn and walk away.

With tears *streaming* down her face, she continues to scream for help at the top of her lungs. In no more than a few moments, *Thian* and the others come running out of one of the shops, eyes

*wide* looking frightened. Anastasia spots them right away, and begins *running* toward them, as they run to her.

“What’s *wrong*?” Thian yells as he approaches Anastasia.

“*Cassa... they... got her!*” she gasps out of breath.

“*Got her? Who got her? What happened?*” Tianna asks with Sadie now clutching at her legs.

“Two *men*! The *same* two men we had met in the road the other day, I’m *sure* of it! The ones who ended up...” then looking at Amanda, “*hanging* upside down. We were talking about Amanda’s *necklace*, and *all* the things she had done, and what *Bellinora* and *Ellanya* had said. I *tried* to get Cassa to keep her *voice* down, but... she was just so *worked* up, and talked *louder* over the music.

“Those *men* came around the corner of the partition, *one* grabbing Cassa. The other one tried to grab *me*, but I jumped away and *hit* him in the face with a *chair*. When I was running away, I looked over my shoulder and, the man with *Cassa* waved his wand and they *both* disappeared. The other guy was just getting up when I ran through the door. Nobody even *tried* to help! *What* are we gonna do?”

“We need to get *out* of here... *now!*” Tianna yells, “Before they come back for *us*. Come on, let’s get our *brooms* and get back to *Bellinora*’s. We’ve *got* to let them know what’s happened. Then make a *plan* to rescue her. *They’ll* help for sure.”

They run as fast as they can back to the Broom Closet, grab their brooms, and fly off as fast as they can, with Anastasia flying on a much slower broom. As they approach the entrance to the cave, they all begin *yelling* for *Bellinora*. They have no sooner dismounted, and begin to run into the cave, still yelling, when *Bellinora* and *Jasmine* come *sprinting* out to meet them.

“What *is* it?” *Bellinora* cries, looking at all their frightened faces.

“*Cassandra*’s been *kidnaped!*” *Amanda* yells, clearly shaken.

“She was *snatched* at the Pub by *two* men,” Thian shouts. “They tried to get *Anastasia* too, but she *decked* him with a chair. They *disappeared* with *Cassandra!*”

“Come. Get inside. *Quickly* now!” *Bellinora* says motioning to the path. “*Jasmine*, keep a *sharp* lookout, and let us know when you see *anything!*”

*Bellinora* closes her eyes for a moment, then raising her right hand from her side, makes a *wide* circle in the air. A light blue *sparkling* veil appears, sealing off the *outer* part of the cave, from the inner. As *Bellinora* turns and runs along the path, *Jasmine* trots *right* through the veil, as it shimmers around her, heading off to watch for the trouble they *both* know will come.

Once inside, everyone gathers near the couches, with *Ellanya* *frantically* asking what is wrong.

*Anastasia* is now *hysterical*, crying so hard she has the hiccups.

“Please... *take* your seats,” *Bellinora* says as calmly as she can, while taking her own seat. “Tell us *exactly* where you were, *what* you were doing, and *why* you think these men tried to kidnap you. Even inside *Witch Mountain*, it is very *rare* for children to be kidnaped in a *crowded* area like the village. What happened?”

Everyone starts talking at once. *Bellinora* holds up her hands. “*Please*, one at a time. *Anastasia*, *calm* yourself, and tell us what happened.”

*Anastasia* begins, and between she and the others, tell *Bellinora* and *Ellanya* they had gone to the pub near *Shadow Alley*, where they had taken their seats, and included everything, up to everyone but *Cassandra* and *Anastasia*, leaving to look around the village some more.

*Anastasia*, calm enough for the others to *understand* her, continues, “*That’s* when *Cassa* started talking about *Amanda* having found the *Necklace of Power*, and *her* being the new

*Wielder of Power*, and how she *found* the necklace while back on the earth realm, and how Amanda had *done* all the things she had, and then found the ancient *transport* chambers.

“Cassa had just *finished* saying how you two thought Amanda could still be *killed*, because she didn’t know *how* to control the necklace and all, and how the necklace had helped her kill *Blaine*, in the village back in the realm of *The Deep Forest Elves*.”

Breaking into huge sobs again, her voice rising and becoming almost *unintelligible*, she tries to continue. “That’s when the two *men* we had seen on the road the other day, came around the *corner* of the partition... and... and *snatched* her right up out of her *chair*!”

“Great *Mother* of Creation!” Ellanya gasps. “They know a *child* has found the *Necklace of Power*, and that she does not know how to *control* it! Worse, that she may be able to be *killed*, and...”

“Yes, I *know* mother,” Bellinora says quickly. “Amanda, I had *hoped* to be able to tell you so *many* things. There is so much I want, and *need* you to know, to *understand*, but there is *no* time now. You must *leave* immediately. I am *sure* those men snatched Cassandra to find out where *you* are.

“You are no longer safe. Not even here. Nor are Jasmine, *Ellanya* or myself any longer. *We* shall have to leave too. Amanda, I fear that you will now be hunted, *wherever* you may go. You must leave here and...”

“But... *where* will I go? *What* will I do?” Amanda pleads as tears stream down her frightened face.

“You have but *one* chance for survival, as far as I can tell,” Bellinora says looking to Ellanya who quickly nods back. “You must *find* the *Great Book of Power*. It is said, that it is the *source* which tells how to combine all the spirits within the necklace into one... one *all-powerful* spirit.

“It tells *you*, the *Wielder*, *how* to control the power of the necklace, and at that time, *you* will become the ultimate *Wielder of Power*. The most *powerful* creature known who, as the story goes, can *no* longer be killed, but will die of old age or some other natural cause. Although, there are *many* stories that say once you bond with the necklace, for some time, you cannot die even at *that* point. Perhaps, not even *now*. No one knows for sure. That book though, is *also* said to contain the instructions for the *safe* removal of the necklace. Whether *that* part of the story is true or not, again, *no* one actually knows either.”

“But, where *is* the book?” Thian asks, as frightened as the others.

“No one *knows*,” Ellanya says, her face very serious in the vapor. “The stone *tablet* told how to find the book, but was *shattered* into thirteen shards, then each shard hidden. They have been *searched* for over the millennia, but only...”

“There was *once* a stone tablet,” Bellinora cuts in, “that was written in a *very* ancient and secret language. The legend says that a *powerful* spell was cast upon the tablet, which *scrambled* the writing into meaningless symbols. The tablet was then *shattered* into thirteen shards. These shards are commonly known today as, *The Thirteen Shards of Legend*. The shards were then hidden in various places, each of which is *guarded* by various spells, *creatures* and the like.

“*Three* shards are said to have been found already. One was found within the *Serpent’s Den*. One was taken from *The Black Tower* of Taldan, who *somehow* had gotten hold of it. He of course, is someone of whom you have already *heard* of. The other was retrieved from *The Land of the Giants*. The recovery of each of these shards cost *many* lives, and much sorrow.

“That leaves *ten* shards yet to be found. You need to *find* them Amanda, then combine *them* with the other three. When you do, it is said that the tablet will *reform* itself. The strange symbols will morph once again into the *ancient* language.

“Only the *Wielder* of the necklace will be able to read what is written on the tablet, through the use of the *oldest* spirit within the gems of the necklace. The tablet will then tell you the *exact* location of the *Great Book of Power*, regardless of where it lay at that time. Once you *have* that Book... you *may*, if the stories told are true, be able to *remove* the necklace safely. Then, perhaps, if you are still... well... *you*... perhaps you will have the strength to *destroy* the necklace, once and for all - if you can find out *how* that is. And, if such a thing is even *possible*.”

“But... where are those three shards now?” Thian asks.

“Do not worry about those for now,” Bellinora says thoughtfully. “We will worry about those *when*, and *if* the time comes. For now though, I need to gather a few things for your journey Amanda. Then, you must leave.”

Bellinora gets up and hurries off down the tunnel, on the far side of the room.

“Ellanya,” Anastasia asks, tears streaming down her face and body shaking, “what will those men *do* to Cassa? Do you think...I mean... do you think they’ll *hurt* her? Can’t we go *after* them and, and *rescue* her? *Please!*”

Ellanya looks at Anastasia, then to the others, who are clearly all scared to death, but want to rescue Cassandra too. With a great sigh, Ellanya says, “It would be of *no* use to try to find and rescue Cassandra. There *is* no saving Cassandra now. I believe those *men* heard enough of her *infernal* babbling to guess what she said was the *truth*. But they will do *anything* to actually *get* the truth from her. And they *will* obtain it... anyway they can.

“Since the two of you, Anastasia, talked about the realm of *The Deep Forest Elves*, and the battle in the village where one of *Taldan’s* apprentices were killed, those men will *verify* what they heard - and they can verify it *quickly* - including Amanda having turned *Blaine* to stone... which is a *very* powerful and *horrible* spell. After all, the victim of that spell is *still* alive while they feel their body *turning* to stone. The *pain* would be, well, *unbearable!*

“That spell is also one which I do not believe *any* other witch nor wizard can perform, since it *did* after all, come from *The Lost Book Of The Dillian’s*. Once those men verify that Amanda may *indeed* possess the *Necklace of Power*... they will *kill* Cassandra.”

Everyone gasps as Anastasia and Tia cover their mouths with their hands. Then Anastasia, once again, screams, burying her face in her hands.

Ellanya continues. “They will then do *everything* in their power to track *each* of you down, and kill *you* too. They want the *Artifact* for themselves of course. The fewer people who *know* about the *Artifact*, and *who* the *Wielder* is, the greater their chance of getting their *hands* on Amanda, *killing* her, and taking the *Artifact* for themselves.

“Now *that* means, they will eliminate anyone of you they feel may go around *talking* about something which should have been kept *secret* in the first place! Cassandra and her *big* mouth has put *all* of you in the greatest of peril!

“I know you are all scared to *hear* all this, but that is the *truth* of it. No sense in your *not* knowing what they will do to her, nor to *you* all, if you are not careful. I am afraid that Cassandra is most likely *dead* already, and that those men are forming a *plan* to capture all of you. My guess is, we have an *hour* or two at the most. Then I fear we will have *unwanted* guests.”

Anastasia is *completely* beside herself, clinging to Tia and sobbing uncontrollably into Tia’s shoulder.

Bellinora hurries back into the room, and over to Amanda. She hands Amanda a folded parchment.

Looking up into Bellinora's piercing eyes, Amanda wipes her eyes, sniffs and asks, "What's this?"

"This is a *partial* map of the Dark Forest Amanda..."

"The *Dark* Forest?!" Tianna exclaims. "But... *honestly*, that's only a *myth*! *Isn't* it? I mean, it's only a scary old *story* we read as kids. I thought you were *kidding* earlier. Nothing like *that* place... could *really* exist!"

"Oh it *exists* alright!" Ellanya snorts, her face stirring up a swirl of the green vapor. "Many *people* and other creatures have *perished* in there looking for the *Thirteen Shards of Legend*. That's how *I* was..."

"Keep that map *safe* Amanda," Bellinora cuts in. "It is the *only* copy, and is *more* than worth *killing* for, especially when used in *conjunction* with the Spectroscope."

"But, how did you *get* it?" Tianna asks suspiciously.

"There is *no* time for that story now," Bellinora says harshly. Then looking to Ellanya for a moment, she sighs, then turns back to the others, her tone softening as she says, "But I would *love* the opportunity to tell it to you at a later time, should things *work* out in the end. The point is, this is the *only* copy, and you must *protect* it with your *life*! Should you feel you will be captured, *send* this map someplace safe... or... *destroy* it!"

Ellanya lets out a cry then says, "Great *Mother*... *destroy* it dear? Do you think it will come to *that*?"

"I do not know mother. But I would rather it be *destroyed* than fall into the hands of the Dark.

"Amanda, one more thing. You will need *this* above all else..."

## The Specteroscope

[To TOC](#)

**B**ellinora stretches out her other hand. She is holding a small dark leather-looking pouch. It has a short gold chain attached from the pouch to another much *longer* chain which has a wonderful golden *dragon* clasp on its end, which looks like it would attach over a belt.

Amanda takes the pouch, pulls the elastic-like mouth open and slips out the contents.

There, Amanda sees something which looks like a very *large* pocket watch. It has wonderful *carvings* on the silver front and back.

Wiping her eyes while sniffing, “It’s *beautiful*. But, what *is* it?” Amanda asks studying the intricate carvings on the front and back.

“That Amanda, is a *very* rare *Specteroscope*.”

“A *what*?” Amanda asks now looking to the others, to see if any of them know what it is. They all shrug, looking just as confused as she does.

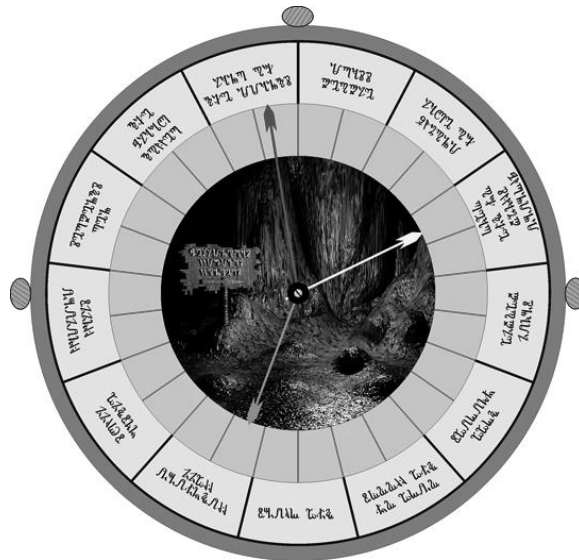
“A *Specteroscope*,” Bellinora smiles weakly. “Mother, perhaps you could explain... *briefly*?”

Nodding in her vapor, Ellanya says, “A *Specteroscope* allows you to communicate with the dead. Well, actually, the *spirits* of the dead of course. There have only been a *few* of these in existence throughout *all* of time itself. As far as I know, this and only *one* other still exist. That is, if the other one really *does* still exist.”

Bellinora and Ellanya exchange knowing looks, then Ellanya continues. “*Open* it Amanda. Push the two side buttons at the same time... Yes, *good*. Now flip open the cover.”

“Wow! It’s *gorgeous*!” Amanda says with her eyes wide and a slight smile on her face.

This is a drawing of roughly what it looks like:



Amanda turns and shows it briefly to the others. “But... how does it *work*?”

“Well,” Ellanya says with a laugh, “on the *surface*, this is a device which allows one to *observe* specters. In other words, a device which allows one to not only *see*, but to *communicate* with the dead.

"A Specteroscope is a very rare and *extremely* valuable object, of the *greatest* Wizitch caliber. As I have stated, only *two* are rumored to possibly still be in existence, so this is a *very* valuable artifact indeed.

"The term *Specter* means, a visible, *disembodied* spirit, or a *ghostly* appearing figure."

"So... a Specter is some kind of *ghost* then?" Amanda asks looking at the wonderful face of the Specteroscope.

"A Specter is *sometimes* referred to as a *Wraith*, when used to describe a dead person or creature," Ellanya continues. "The terms Specter and Wraith - *Wraith's* perhaps even more than Specter's - are used to refer to something *shadowy* and insubstantial, when talking about a spirit.

"The Specteroscope in *your* hands, Amanda, is the *rarest* type of *all* Specteroscopes, for *this* scope, and perhaps the other surviving one, belonged to one of the *Ancients*. And therefore, holds within its workings, the *knowledge* of ages past, much of which has *fallen* from modern memory. These Specteroscopes, not only allow one who is *worthy* to use it, to dial in and *talk* to various spirits, but to *command* them as well. *That* scope will also allow you to *Transmutate* and *Translocate* as well, amongst many other modes and functions."

"I'm not sure I know what... *Transmutate* and *Translocate* mean," Tianna says with a look of confusion.

"Of course," Ellanya says nodding in the vapor. "The term *Transmutate* has many meanings, however, when the word is used in reference to the *Specteroscope*, it means, to *change* or transform in appearance, *nature*, or form. Such as to transmute or *metamorphose*.

"The term, *Translocate*, when referring to the Specteroscope, means to cause to change from *one* place or position, to *another*. In other words, to *move* from one place to another.

"When used in the *Translocate* mode, the Specteroscope will *transport* the user, and anyone either *touching* them, someone who is touching *that* person and so on, *safely* to some other location, no *matter* the distance nor environment. With *this* scope, one does not have to worry about Translocating into a *tree*, side of a building, or *half* in and *half* out of a boulder. It will *always* transport you safely to your intended destination.

"When used in the *Transmutate* mode, one is, well, *Transmuted*, or changed into some other appearance, *nature* or form."

"What do you mean, change into some other appearance, *nature* or form?" Tia asks looking at Thian and Tianna, who shrug and look at Ellanya too.

"While in the *Transmutate* mode, the user may *instantly* change their appearance. An example may be from a young *girl* like Amanda, into an old, *bent* man, with a long white *beard*, weathered skin, who walks with a *cane*. It will even change your *clothing* and provide accessories like the cane. All you need to do is concentrate on what you want.

"This mode will also allow the user to change their *form*. For instance, they may change from the young *girl*, into a *bird*, spider, *mouse*, cat, dog, *bear*, or even any *imaginable* creature. And by the way, I do mean *any... imaginable... creature*. Even one that does *not* exist, but is created from the users *own* imagination.

"Using this same *Transmutate* mode, you can even change your *nature*. Changing one's nature while using the Specteroscope is, by *design*, only to be temporary, the time frame being set by the *Transmutater* at the time of need.

"Changing one's nature is *generally* used in conjunction with the transmutation, into some other form. For example, say Amanda Transmutates into the form of a *bear*. She now *looks* like a bear, *walks* like a bear, has the *strength* of a bear... but her girl-like *nature*... perhaps someone who is *shy* or *timid*, still exists. Temporarily changing one's *nature* to be more direct, *aggressive*,

mean and such, can be *most* useful at times. Even if Amanda wishes to remain in her same *physical* form, perhaps for a time, she needs to change from her shy and *timid* nature, to one more outgoing and *aggressive*.

“When one *masters* the combinations of Transmutating to some other form, along with matching one’s *nature* to the situation at hand... this becomes one of the most *powerful* uses for these very ancient and powerful Specteroscopes.”

“Cool!” Thian says looking at the Specteroscope, imagining himself transformed into all *kinds* of interesting creatures. “But, uh, well, if you changed into, like a *spider* or bird, wouldn’t you have the *brain* of a spider or bird, and, well, not be very *smart*?”

“Good *thinking* Thian,” Bellinora says with a smile. “When *I* was very young, *I* asked the same question. The answer however is, *no*. Through the use of *very* advanced Wizitch, you retain your *own* brainpower, regardless if you become something *larger*, or even become something as small as a *virus*.”

“Wow! But how do you *use* it though?” Amanda asks looking very nervous.

“The three *dials* around the Specteroscope,” Ellanya continues, “can be used in *many* ways to alter the mode or *functions* of the Specteroscope. Turning a dial will move one of the *hands* on the face. *Pressing* a dial button, works like a momentary *contact* switch. When the dial is used in some *sequence* of presses, like pressing it *two* or more times, this will allow the Specteroscope to do some *function*... accomplish some *specific* task. Pressing the dial’s button in some sequence using two or *more* dial buttons, will cause some *other* mode or function to take place. Pressing and *holding* a dial button or *buttons*, while pressing another dial button multiple times, will change to some *other* mode, and perform some *other* function. Therefore, the possible *combinations* of multiple *pressings* and *holdings*, of any or *all* of these dial buttons, may yield countless *millions* of possible modes and *their* resulting millions of *functions*.”

“Holy *cow*!” Amanda says looking at the Specteroscope. “How do you ever know *how* to use it at all?”

Ellanya chuckles, “The uses of the Specteroscope are *so* vast, a type of built-in *user’s* manual is available anytime you need it, with both written instructions, as well as full *Wizitch* movie examples of its many uses, of which we have no time to discuss here. Amanda, since this scope has been... *enhanced*, you may also *ask* the Specteroscope for instructions, on how to do *whatever* you have in mind. If it is *Wizitchly* possible, using the powers within the device, or those which it may *call* upon... instructions *will* be given.”

“Amanda,” Bellinora begins, “I had hoped to be able to spend much more time with you, but *time* is something we have little of. I have already programmed the Specteroscope for what your main objective is, and *that* is to find and obtain the remaining *ten* lost shards of legend.

“This Specteroscope Amanda, shows around its *outside*, as currently *programmed* that is, the *possible* thirteen locations of the *Thirteen Shards of Legend*. From the top dial and going *counterclockwise*, the *first* three locations shows where the shards have *already* been recovered. Do not concern yourself at *this* time, with their *present* locations, or *who* currently has them. When, and *if*, you are able to obtain the remaining ten, the location of the others will be revealed to you.

“The next ring on the Specteroscope’s face, shows two gray areas beneath each of the locations. These currently *blank* spaces will change to show various images or *symbols*, dependent upon which mode or function you activate.

“The center of the Specteroscope is *currently* showing a static image of my cave entrance. *You* as the user may put *whatever* image you wish as a static image, whenever you like. That

center space is also a type of, well, in *your* realm, video *monitor*. This is where you may see and communicate with the *Specters* you choose to summon. Also, the *Master Specter usually* rises up and *out* of the center and takes *form* right before you. Scared the *daylights* out of me the first time that happened. The center may also show the user's manual, or *tens* of millions of other videos, something like a *how-to* library, or very detailed reference manual on almost *any* subject imaginable. There are of course, *other* uses, but there is simply *no* time to discuss them now.

"When the dials are set *just* so, and the buttons pressed and or held as *required*, a mist-like smoke will rise from the center, and form into either a *full* or partial *Specter* or apparition. It *may* even show a type of *holographic* image of some location... a kind of 3D floating *map*, which may be rotated and viewed by *any* angle possible. To do so, you simply *wave* your hand within the mist, in a motion representing the *direction* of your desired viewpoint.

"The list of *uses* for the Specteroscope are simply *countless*. But I will now show you the ones you will need to get you *started*, including how to *ask* the Specteroscope for help.

"However, you need to *enter* the Dark Forest... *before* you use the Specteroscope. I have cast spells to *prevent* its use inside these caves, or *anywhere* else I deemed may be necessary, for my *own* reasons."

Bellinora then explains how to call up the manual, and explains how the Translocation section works, since they *will* have to Translocate to the areas where each of the shards are to be found, once *inside* the Dark Forest. Since no one knows *where* within those areas the shards actually rest, it will be up to the kids to search *everywhere*. The *map* Amanda has been handed, will change to a map *representing* whatever area they Translocate to. If they have Translocated to an area where a shard *may* be found, the map will show the most likely route to take, and *possible* locations where it may be hidden.

After a little over an hour, "...and that is but a *brief* overview of how you use some of its *many* modes and functions Amanda. Do you have any..." Bellinora *snaps* her head around, looking intently to the tunnel leading out of the cave.

The others soon hear it too - the *scurrying* of tiny feet over the cavern floor. Jasmine soon comes *sprinting* into the room at full speed mewing *frantically*.

"They're *coming*!" Ellanya says, her expression serious. "And it seems those two men have *indeed* brought some help." Looking at Bellinora, Ellanya says quickly, "They *must* leave... *now*! There is no *time* to be wasted. I can be of no further use for now... not *here*. I bid you well daughter, be *safe*."

Turning to Amanda and the others, she says, "May the *Great Mother* watch over you all. I hope to see you all again under *better* circumstances. Amanda... keep the *map* and the Specteroscope *safe*, at *all* costs, and do not *lose* the pouch either! And listen... when you *do* find a shard... *if* you do that is... send it someplace *safe* as we have said. Let *no* one know where you send them, not even your *friends* here. Do you *understand*?"

All Amanda can do is nod. She is so *scared* she can hardly swallow.

"Goodbye mother. I will *summon* you when *Jasmine* and I are safe." Bellinora pulls her wand, waves it over Ellanya, and the vapor *vanishes* as though a gust of wind had blown it apart.

"But... where do I *go*?" Amanda stammers, tears *streaming* down her face as she begins to shake.

"You mean, where do *we* go?!" Thian says getting to his feet, followed by Tianna, Tia and Sadie. Anastasia seems *frozen* to her seat.

"What? You mean... you *still* want to come *with* me?" Amanda asks in shock.

“Well, I’m *sure* not going to stay *here*, *that’s* for sure!” Thian says seriously. “And like we said before, we’re your *friends*, and we seem to be *in* this thing now as *deeply* as you.”

Turning to Tianna, Tia and Sadie, Thian says, “Well, I can’t speak for the *rest* of you, but, she’s not going *anywhere* without me. Who’s *with* us?”

“I’m in, that’s for *sure*!” Tianna says almost angrily. “I’ve *still* got a score to settle. So, you’re not going without *me*. How about it sis... you *in*?”

“I go where *you* go, and I’m not letting Amanda go *anywhere* without me! But what about *Sadie*?”

“I’m going too. I’ve got no place *else* to go... and *somebody* has to take care of Tianna.”

Tia turns to Anastasia saying, “Listen, Anastasia, you *can’t* come with us. You’ve got to get back to your *mom*, and, well, let her know what’s *happened*. Well, not about the *necklace* of course, but that *Cassandra* was...”

“That will *not* be necessary,” Bellinora says nervously, looking down the tunnel where they can now hear *yelling* from outside. “I *know* the village you are from Anastasia, and I will *send* you back there now. I’m afraid I need to *alter* your memory though. Do not worry, it will *not* hurt.”

Bellinora points her wand at the frightened Anastasia. With the *flick* of her wand, she says, “Sleep!” Anastasia *instantly* closes her eyes and her chin drops to her chest, while standing perfectly still. Walking to Anastasia, Bellinora tells her that she and the others had *searched* for the entrance to Witch Mountain, but could *not* find it. Frustrated, Amanda, Thian, Tianna and Sadie left to go back to their homes.

Cassandra and Anastasia had been on their way back, when Cassandra wandered off from camp to stretch her legs one evening, but *never* returned. Anastasia had *searched* for hours, but never found her. She too becomes *lost* for a time, but *somehow* ends up in the forest just outside the village, and finds her way back home.

Bellinora begins to finish the spell, when they hear a *great* bang. Bellinora *snaps* around to look to the cave entrance, steps back, and with a *wave* of her wand, Anastasia, her *broom* and travelers pack from the closet *vanish*, leaving the others with their mouths hanging open.

Amanda could have *sworn* that just as Anastasia was vanishing, she *opened* her eyes.

The shouting is much louder now, and many *flashes* are coming from the tunnel leading outside.

“The *energy* veil will only hold them for a few more *minutes* at best. There are *more* of them than I had planned for,” Bellinora says anxiously. “*Jasmine*, prepare to leave - you *know* what to do... *go*!” With that, Jasmine shoots out of the room and down the tunnel.

“Well, that *settles* it then,” Thian says seriously, his eyes wide with fright. “So, uh, where *is* this Dark Forest anyway?”

“Follow after Jasmine. She will lead you to a *hidden* passage within the back cavern. She will open it for you. Once you are inside, *follow* the pathway to the old door. Once *inside* though, you need to...”

There is a *brilliant* flash and they hear feet running in the tunnel leading to where they are all standing.

Bellinora *waves* her hand and all the kids’ brooms and packs appear at their feet.

“*Grab* your things and go! Run... *now*!” Bellinora yells as she runs for the tunnel leading outside. Thian grabs his pack, slips it on, then grabs his broom.

Beginning to run, Thian grabs the still *stunned* Amanda, and pulls her along after him to her travelers pack. She slips the Spectroscope into its pouch, clips the end of the long chain to her

belt, then slips the pouch into a deep pocket. Looking to the others, Amanda snatches up her broom. The others slip their packs on quickly, grab their brooms and *run*.

Amanda glances over her shoulder to see Bellinora now firing bolts of *red* lightning down the tunnel, with *bolt* after bolt flying past her from those outside.

“No! *Wait!* We’ve got to *help* her. *Bellinora!*” Amanda cries.

Bellinora turns slightly to look back over her shoulder to Amanda, then says just loud enough for Amanda to hear, “I am *sorry* child. Sorry for all the *hurt* and sorrow I have caused. Please, *forgive* me.” Then as a bolt *whizzes* past Bellinora’s right ear, Bellinora yells to Amanda, “*Go!* Your path lies in a *different* direction. Your *destiny* is not as yet written. I will hold them as long as I can. Do not *worry* about Jasmine and I. We will leave *soon* ourselves. Now *GO!*” Bellinora leans into the tunnel and fires off several quick bolts. The kids can hear *screams* as her bolts strike their intended marks.

Amanda is once again *grabbed* by the arm, and half *dragged* along the tunnel by Thian.

The kids round a corner and enter a large room, something like a *storage* room. Jasmine is perched atop a small box on the floor. Jasmine looks at a portion of the solid cavern wall right beside her. She then *mumbles* something in her strange *cat* speak, and an opening appears through the rock.

“Come *on!* Thian yells as they run to the opening. “*Thanks* Jasmine. I hope we meet again sometime. Be *safe* okay?”

Jasmine nods mumbling something.

Squirming out of Tianna’s grip, Sadie drops to the floor and *runs* to Jasmine, where she picks her up and gives her a *hug* and a kiss. Then with tears in her eyes says, “I *love* you Jasmine. Don’t *forget* me okay?” then puts Jasmine back on the box.

Amanda *swears* that Jasmine actually *smiles* as she gives a soft mew and tilt of her head.

“Come on, we’ve *got* to get out of here... *now!*” Tianna screams, picking Sadie up again and running into the opening to the new tunnel passageway.

They run further into the tunnel, then, suddenly, *everything* goes dark. They come *skidding* to a stop, Tia sliding *right* into the back of Tianna, making her cry out.

“Get your *wands* out and *light* em up!” Thian yells. “Jasmine’s *sealed* the entrance. There’s no *light* in here. We need to get *away* from here and find that *door* Bellinora was talking about. Come on! Let’s *go!*” They pull their wands, and shaking from head to toe, light them.

They sprint down the dark tunnel within the mountain, which is itself, *within* a mountain.

They can hear *nothing* but their own, heavy, *shuddering* breathing - that and the sound of their *boots* as they run over the dirt and *pebble* strewn pathway.

They run further still, into the *stifling* darkness within the mountain.

## The Pentagram Puzzle

[To TOC](#)



They run for what seems like forever. Then, as they run around yet *another* curve, they spot a large wooden door ahead in the glow of their blue wandlight.

“Well, at least we found the *door* okay,” Tia says panting for breath.

“Yeah, well, Bellinora said it would lead to the Dark Forest. Although, I guess that would mean we would be going into yet *another* hollow part of this mountain, which is *already* inside a mountain,” Tianna says looking back down the tunnel, listening for anyone following them. “And since this door seems to be the *only* way we can go, let’s not just *stand* here okay. Thian, *open* the door, and let’s see what this *forest* looks like.”

Thian tries the door. It won’t budge. Holding up his broom arm, Thian says, “Orathian!” there is the usual *clank, clank, clanking* noise working its way up the door. The door slowly opens on its own, as a *large* cavern instantly lights, *startling* everyone.

“*This* isn’t a forest,” Sadie says lowering her wand. “It’s just another *cavern*. Did we *miss* something or do something *wrong*?”

“No... at least I don’t *think* so,” Tianna says following Thian through the door into the cavern. “But, Bellinora didn’t say *anything* about this cavern did she?”

“No. At least I don’t *remember* her saying anything about it,” Tia says looking at Amanda and Thian, who both shake their heads.

“But, she had just *started* to say something about what we *needed* to do when we came to the door though, *remember*?” Amanda says looking around.

“Well, *this* is interesting,” Thian says. “Not what I was *expecting* at all. Any of you see another door or way *out* of here, or *something*?”

“No,” Tianna says, walking quickly into the large dimly lit room. The cavern is somewhat larger than a good-sized *house* and is glowing a soft blue.

“Just that really *huge* Pentagram on the floor. Look how *big* it is! And *look*... there’s a huge round *medallion* of some kind with a big *skull* on it, with squiggly *lines* over it too.”

“Yeah,” Amanda says looking up to it. “It must be nine or *ten* feet in diameter.”

The Pentagon on the floor is as large in diameter as a large house, each *petal* of the Pentagon the size of a large bedroom.

“Hey, look over *there*,” Thian says jogging further to the right. “There’s *another* huge medallion too. Looks about the same size and has a *Pentagram* with that *Theban* writing on it too, I think. And it’s got a *smaller* metal medallion mounted in the center, with a *skull* on it.

“They sure do like their *skulls* and Pentagrams *don’t* they? And look at those things on the *floor*, next to the one with the *squiggly* lines on it. One looks like some kind of *console* or something. There’re a couple of other pedestals with *levers* on them I think, one pedestal on *each* side. Let’s see what they are. Maybe we need to *pull* a lever or something to get into the Dark Forest.”

Thian is almost to them when Tianna yells, “Yeah, but don’t *touch* anything Thian! I don’t want to end up in some *bone* pit again because you tripped another *trap*!”

As Thian arrives at the console, he says just loud enough for everyone to hear, “I wasn’t *going* to touch anything. *Snarkins*, give me a *break* will ya?”

In a moment, the others join Thian, standing around what is *clearly* a console with dials on it.

On either side of the console, mounted to the floor, is a tall pedestal. Each has a large *lever* sticking out of it like the letter ‘T,’ with the cross piece as a kind of handle.

“What do you think these *lever* things are for?” Amanda asks walking around one of the pedestals.

“Have no idea,” Tia says shaking her head as she walks around the other one. “There’s no writing on them either, at least that I can see.”

“These *dials* are really neat though,” Thian says as he reaches out for one.

“If you *touch* that dial Thian, I’ll put the worst *pus* and *boil* spell on you that you could ever *imagine*!” Tianna shoots hotly at him. “And I’ll toss in a good *itching* spell like I did to *Blaine* too for good measure, and you *know* where I hit *him*!”

Thian *snaps* his hand back just as his fingers touch the dial. Turning several shades of pink, he steps back a little mumbling something the others cannot quite make out.

“Well,” Tia says stepping up to get a better look at the console. “These dials *are* interesting, and a little *creepy* - six circular dials, each with a *skull* on them. Weird.”

“Yeah,” Sadie says pointing to the dials, “and each of the skulls are facing the *same* way too.”

“Let’s take a closer look at those *medallions* on the wall okay,” Amanda says heading for the one nearest the pedestal. “I wonder why Bellinora didn’t *say* anything about this place?”

“I think she was about to, if we hadn’t been *attacked*,” Tia says looking around.

They walk to the huge metal medallion, which is mounted into the cavern wall, off to the left of the console. It has a *very* large skull on it, and *five* sets of squiggly symbols above it.

The medallion looks like this:



“What do you think this is for?” Thian asks reaching out to touch the huge skull.

“*Thian!*” Tianna yells, Thian snatches his hand back looking frightened. “Do you *have* to touch *everything*? By the *moons*, put your hands in your *pockets* or something before you get us all *killed... or worse!*”

“It’s just a huge *metal* medallion of some kind is all!” Thian shoots back, now a little angry himself. “*Touching* it won’t *hurt* anything you know.”

“Yeah, *sure* Thian, just like stepping over a *line* and walking past it won’t *hurt* anything either. Like you did when we found the huge *face*, remember? But we know how *that* turned out now *don’t* we!?” Tianna shoots back angrily.

“Okay, *stop* it you two,” Tia says placing her hands on her hips. “Tianna, *stop* yelling at Thian, and Thian, since we really don’t know what *might* happen if we *do* touch something, for now, it may be a better idea just to *look*, until we figure out what we should do *okay?*”

Both Thian and Tianna are scowling at one another, when Sadie, who walked to the other huge medallion says, “These *are* Theban letters on this medallion, like the writing on the *tongue* and all the others we’ve seen.”

Everyone turns to look to Sadie. As Amanda heads over to join her, the others follow, both Thian and Tianna grumbling something under their breaths.

The medallion looks like this:



“It’s really *beautiful*, if it weren’t for the *skull* that is,” Amanda says looking up at the huge medallion. “It’s some kind of *greenish* blue stone with raised carved *letters* on it, surrounded by some kind of *black* stone. The Pentagram looks like inlayed *gold* or something. It’s really *striking*.”

“Well, let’s see what it says,” Amanda says as she concentrates on transforming the letters. After a few moments she says, “Well, I get *letters*, but, uh, how do you *read* it?”

“Theban in *most* realms is read from top to bottom, left to right, like *lots* of writing is on other realms,” Sadie says tilting her head back to look to the medallion. “But, we were taught that if you find Theban written within some kind of diagram, or *image*, it *may* be read that way, or, read from *right* to left, from the *bottom* to the top.”

“But Sadie, this is *round*,” Thian says looking confused, “and the letters aren’t in any *order* you know? So, how would you read *that*?”

Sadie giggles saying, “I know, *confusing* huh? I asked my *teacher* the same thing when we came to something like this in our class. When you find the witch’s alphabet in something *circular*, you read it from the *bottom*, in a *counter-clockwise* fashion, and from the *outside* in to the center.”

“So, what?” Tianna asks studying the writing. “You read this one from the bottom, around the *outside* of the Pentagram, *counterclockwise*, then what?”

“Then you continue to read from the *next* letter you find on the *next* level in toward the center. Since there isn’t any letter facing *directly* down here, you find the one closest to the bottom to the right. So...”

“So, we read all the way around the outside *first*,” Amanda says pointing to the lettering, “Then, in *our* case, we read what is on each of the *petals* of the Pentagram? Is that right?”

Sadie smiles nodding quickly. “So, this is how *I’d* read it... the bottom letter is the letter ‘C.’ The one to the *right* is the letter ‘H,’ the one at the *top* right is the letter ‘O.’ That top left one is *another* ‘O.’ The one on the bottom left, and the last letter on the *outside* is the letter ‘S.’”

“So, so far we have ‘c-h-o-o-s’ *right*?” Thian asks.

“Yeah,” Sadie says smiling. “And since we finished the outside, we start with the *petal* at the bottom right, and work our way around again. So, the *next* letter is the letter ‘E.’ The top *right*

petal is the letter 'W.' The *top* petal is the letter 'E.' The top *left* petal is the letter 'L,' and the *bottom* left petal is the letter 'L' too."

Tia has been writing the letters on a piece of paper she conjured from thin air with a wave of her wand, along with a pen she had materialized in her hand.

"So, what does it *say*?" Thian asks with an odd expression.

Tia turns her piece of paper around to show them.

C H O O S E W E L L

"Does anybody else get, uh, 'Choose Well' out of that?" Amanda asks now looking to the others.

"That's what *I* get too," Tia says looking to Tianna.

"That's the only thing *I* get too," Tianna says furrowing her brows. "But what in *two* moons does it *mean*? Choose... *what* well?"

"Have no idea," Thian says looking back up to the medallion. "But the only things *in* here I see that we *can* choose, are which *dials* to turn on that pedestal, or which *lever* to pull. Do you think it's talking about *those*?"

"Must be," Tianna says. "There isn't any writing at *all* on the giant Pentagram on the floor. And that *other* medallion only has a huge *skull* and those weird *squiggle* symbols on them. Sadie, do you know what those *symbols* mean? Are they some kind of *writing* or something?"

"I don't know. I've never seen anything *like* them before."

"Amanda, do *you* know what they are?" Tia asks. Then pointing to Amanda's chest says, "I mean, can you ask your *necklace* or something, or can it tell *you* what this stuff means?"

Everyone looks at Amanda, who looks startled.

"You can *talk* to a necklace?" Sadie asks excitedly. "And... it talks *back*? I've never seen you do *that* before. How do you *talk* to it? Can you teach *me*?"

"Uh, well, I... *no*, I don't know *what* this stuff means, and I don't know *how* to talk to my necklace either. I wish Bellinora or *Ellanya* would have given me some idea how to *use* this thing. Golly, I hope Bellinora and *Jasmine* are okay."

"Me too," Tia says nervously. "But right now, I'm a *little* more worried about *us* getting out of here, before we have *company*."

"If we ever *get* out of here..." Thian says grumpily shaking his head. "There aren't even any *doors* to choose from to *get* out of here. What do you think those *dials* and the levers *really* do?"

Turning and walking away from the medallion with the Theban on it, Tianna heads back toward the pedestal with the dials. "I'm not sure, but since those are the *only* things in here, and they have to do *something*, let's take a closer look."

The others walk back to the pedestal to join Tianna.

"Well, before we *do* anything at all," Tia says pulling the little pad of paper and pen from her pocket. "I want to draw this like it is *now*, along with the two pedestals with the levers on them." When she finishes, she turns the pad around and says, "*This* look okay?"



They all agree that her drawing is a good representation of how things are set.

“Okay then,” Tia says turning to look at the dials along with everyone else. “So, we don’t know of any other way to go, since there are no other *doors* anyplace. The only thing we *know* is the door we just *came* through, and the hidden one *Jasmine* let us through. So, we either...”

“*Do* something with these dials and levers,” Tianna says, “or go *back*, which we *can’t*, since we don’t know how to open the hidden rock doorway anyway, or who, or *what* may still be there waiting for us.”

“Well then,” Thian says nervously, looking back at the open doorway, expecting to hear dozens of feet *thundering* after them. “Let’s turn *these* and pull the levers and see what *happens*. If something *bad* starts to happen, let’s get back through the door and *lock* it, then think of *something*.”

“Great!” Tianna says with a snort. “We’re *actually* going to do what Thian wanted to do when we first got *in* here and *spin* the dials. I’ve got a *really* bad feeling about this.”

Not liking the tone Tianna is directing toward Thian, Amanda says a little more sternly than she means, “Well, if *you* have a *better* idea Tianna, I’d sure like to *hear* it! We are in a little bit of a *hurry* here.”

Tianna shoots Amanda a cross look, then Tia steps between them and says, “It looks to *me* like we have no *choice* really. We either figure out what these *dials* and the levers do, or we try to find a way to get *back* into Bellinora’s cave. And I don’t think we’ll *like* what we find *there* either. I mean, she and *Jasmine* may already have left! And I for one, have *no* intention of going *back*, just to be *killed* by those men and their little band of *cutthroats*.”

“Sadie, do you know *anything* about how these dials might be used or something? I mean, some of these dials are *above* and in between others. Does that *mean* anything to you?”

“No, I don’t remember seeing *anything* like these in class.”

“Well, so which do we do first?” Amanda asks. “Turn a *dial* or pull one of the levers?”

“Let’s just pull the lever on the *right* and see what happens,” Thian says looking intently at the bronze lever he is standing next to.

“Okay. *Go* ahead Thian,” Tianna says with a grunt, “but before you *do*, I say everyone *mount* up and get ready to fly the heck *out* of here... *fast*!”

They all agree and mount their brooms, adjust their traveler’s packs, then begin hovering just above the floor.

Thian drifts over to the large lever and hovers. He looks to the others for a second, then puts his hand on the cross bar. “Well, here *goes*,” he says nervously.

Thian pulls down *hard*. The lever moves easily. There is a *clunking* noise and everyone *freezes*, eyes flying wide.

Nothing.

“Did any of you see anything *happen*?” Sadie asks looking around the large chamber.

None of them have.

Thian drifts over to the lever on the left of the console, places his hand on it, and pulls it down.

Again they hear a *clunk*, but nothing happens at all.

“Well, I guess we have to do something with the *dials* first,” Amanda says looking to the six dials. “Thian, try turning one of *them* and see what happens.”

Thian maneuvers his broom sideways so he can reach the dials while still floating on his broom, ready to fly for all he is worth, should anything *bad* happen.

“Which one though?” Thian asks turning to look to the others.

“Don’t think it *matters* much really at this point,” Tia says. “At least until we see if anything *happens* at all. Maybe we need to *turn* a dial, *then* pull the levers, and, I don’t know... maybe a *door* will show up in the walls or something.”

Thian reaches out and grabs hold of the third dial from the left. Licking his lips, he turns it to the right.

There is a *click* as the dial *snaps* into a new position with the bar on the skull now facing vertically.

Nothing.

“Try one of the levers now Thian,” Amanda says pointing to the lever on the right.

“Yeah, *okay*.” Thian drifts to the lever on the right and pulls it down. It again makes a *clunk*, but nothing happens.

“Do you think whatever the *dials* or levers are hooked to, are *broken*?” Sadie asks looking to Tianna.

“Don’t know Sadie. *Thian*, try the other lever and see what that does.”

Thian drifts to the other lever and pulls it down.

Nothing.

“Well, this is *just* great!” Tianna snarls. “We don’t know if this thing is *broken* or not. I mean, it could be *thousands* of years old for all we know. It may not *work* at all anymore!”

“Yeah, maybe,” Tia says looking concerned. “Thian, try turning another one of the dials, *then* try the levers again okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

Thian turns another dial, then pulls the levers.

Nothing.

He turns another dial and pulls the levers.

Nothing.

After some *fifteen* minutes pass, with Thian turning dial after dial, each time pulling first one lever, then the other, with *no* results, everyone dismounts to gather around the dials.

“Oh! This is so *maddening*!” Tianna shouts. “This is getting us *nowhere*! Thian’s not *doing* it right!”

Thian rounds on Tianna yelling, “Well why don’t *you* just do it *yourself* then? If you think *you’re* so smart Tianna, let’s see what *you* can do then!”

“Yeah? Well, maybe I *will*!” Tianna shoots back. “Get *out* of my way Thian, and let *me* do it!”

Thian, *red* in the face and scowling at Tianna, steps aside as she steps up to the dials.

Looking confused, and feeling nervous with *all* eyes fixed on *her* now, Tianna stammers, “Well, you’ve got them all *messed* up now Thian. I don’t know *which* ones you turned, or how many *times* or anything. You *should’ve* written everything you did *down* you know?”

“What? I, *you*...”

“Wait,” Tia says pulling the little drawing of the dials from her pocket. “I *drew* what the dials looked like when we first *looked* at them, *remember*? Let’s turn them back to where they *were* first.”

“But how do you *know* where they were first?” Sadie asks.

“Here look. *See*, like you had said before, *all* the dials had their skulls facing *directly* to the left. Let’s turn them all back to that position okay?”

“Is it okay if I turn them back Tianna? Or do *you* want to do it... *yourself*?” Thian asks with his arms crossed.

“*Fine, you do it then!*” Tianna says as she mounts her broom, then soars up and over them all, almost *kicking* Thian in the head. She drifts over to float in front of the medallion with the squiggle symbols on it.

Thian just finished spinning all the dials back to their original positions, *grumbling* under his breath, when Tianna asks still facing the medallion, “How may *dials* are there?”

“Six, why?” Tia asks watching Tianna study the squiggly symbols.

“Well, it may not be anything at *all*, but take a look at these *squiggly* things for a minute.”

Everyone makes their way over to the medallion.

“What about ‘em?” Thian asks looking intently at each of them in turn.

“The *squiggles* are actually made out of straight lines,” Tianna says narrowing her eyes.

“Yeah. *So?*” Thian asks sarcastically.

“Soooo,” Tianna says pointing to the squiggles, “how many *lines* do you see making up each *one* of these squiggle symbols?”

They count.

“*Six* of them,” Amanda says as her eyes grow larger. “And there are *six* dials too. It *has* to mean something, don’t you *think?*”

“Well, honestly, I don’t *know* really,” Tianna says. “It *could* just be a coincidence... I guess.”

“Well... *usually* Tianna’s guesses are *pretty* good,” Thian says with a thin smile. “Tia, let me have your pad and pen for a minute okay?”

“Yeah, sure, here. What are you thinking?”

Thian takes the pad and pen, “I’m not sure yet, but I *have* an idea. Let me draw this out, *then* I’ll explain it.”

Thian looks at the squiggles for a minute, draws something, then jogs back to the dials, draws some more, then, tapping the pad *hard* with his pen and nodding, he smiles. Thian yells to the others as he jogs back. “I think I’ve *figured* something out.”

“Well, *this* would be a first,” Tianna sniggers, drawing dirty looks along with smiles from the others.

“What did you draw Thian?” Amanda asks curiously.

“Well, *take* a look at this. Here is a drawing of the *squiggle* on the right side of the medallion.



“Yeah, *so?*” Tianna says looking confused.

“Well, what if we *break* the squiggle apart like this, *look.*”



“Thian, so *what?*” Tianna says with frustration. “So now you have a bunch of *lines*, big deal.”

Thian, feeling a little *stung* stammers, “Don’t you *see* it? Don’t these lines look kind of *familiar* to you?”

Everyone looks at the lines for a moment, then Thian says, “Here, *look!*”

He then flips to the little drawing Tia had made.

“Look at the lines here on the *dials*, then at the *broken* lines from the squiggles.”



Tianna snipes back, “Thian, what *are* you talking...” her eyes go large. “By the *moons*...”

“What?” Amanda asks looking at Tia, then to Tianna’s growing grin as she nods. “What *is* it? What do you two *see*?”

“Look at the *positions* those little bars on the dials make,” Thian says with a smile. “Now, look at the squiggle *broken* apart. *See* anything?”

It takes Amanda and Tia just a second to spot it as Sadie jumps to try to see the paper that Thian is holding too high for her to see.

“Yes!” Amanda says grinning, “Those *lines* correspond to the *same* positions that are on some of the dials. Are you *saying*, that these, uh, *squiggle* symbols, really represent some kind of *combination* of dial positions?”

“Yeah, I think they *might!*” Thian says looking at Tianna, who smiles, nodding her approval.

“But, how do we *read* the symbols?” Amanda asks. “I mean, do we read it *top* to bottom... bottom to *top*, or has it been turned *sideways* or even *upside* down? With *six* dials, there could be *hundreds* of permutations, and that doesn’t include which *lever* or levers you need to pull either. This could take *forever* to figure out you know?”

“Actually, I think that’s *kind* of the idea,” Tia says now walking back to the dials as the others follow.

“What do you mean?” Amanda asks.

“I think, that *maybe*, to keep others from, uh, getting *to* the Dark Forest, if they *did* somehow manage to find their way into this room... that *somebody* made this, well, *puzzle* thing. If you can *solve* it, you *pass* and get to go on. If you *fail* it... well, that’s the part I don’t *know* about, but I’m thinking it could *really* be bad. I mean, either it takes *forever* to figure this thing out and someone would just give up and leave, *or*, you put the dials in the *wrong* positions, and something really *horrible* happens. Like the *bone* pit!”

They all look nervous and turn to look at the dials that Thian had been spinning earlier.

After a moment, Thian steps to the panel, turning to the others. Everyone nods, including Tianna, who smiles weakly as Thian returns a smile of his own.

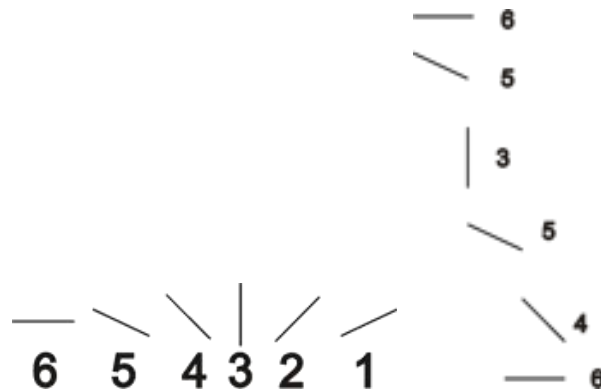
Thian looks at Sadie. “Sadie, these aren’t those Theban *witch* alphabet things, but do you think since the medallion is *round*, we read it from *right* to left like we did the letters on the *Pentagram*?”

“Maybe. It may not be *witch* writing, but, since this whole thing was *made* by witches, I *think*... and we *are* in *The Realm of The Witches* after all... *yeah*, I think we *do* the symbols from right to left, *counterclockwise* around the medallion. *Oh*, and since in a diagram or something *round* like this, you read from right to left, instead of left to right, I think we should *number* the dials from right to left, *then* see if we can match the lines from one of the symbols... then see what happens.”

Everyone shrugs and decides to try it.

Thian numbers the dial drawing Tia had done, and numbers the lines from the symbol on the right side of the medallion.

“Okay, *this* is how I’ve got them numbered, everyone agree?” Thian asks as he shows them his pad.



“Looks okay to me,” Amanda says nodding. “So, the positions we see *now* on the dials, correspond to how we *set* each dial... according to how we see the line in the *symbol*?”

“Yeah, at least I *think* so,” Thian says. “I mean, looking at the dials, the number *one* has a really *slanted* line to the right. The number *two* a little more vertical. *Three* is straight up and down, *four* is slanted a little to the left, *five* is further to the left, and...”

“The *six* is horizontal,” Amanda says nodding. “So, if I’ve got this *right*, since we read the lines of the symbol from *bottom* to top, and set the dials from *right* to left, then we set dial one so the bar is *horizontal*, representing the position for number *six*. The next line *up* on the symbol is tilted just a *little* to the left, so...”

“We set dial *two*, so it looks like the dial *four* position from the original drawing,” Sadie says nodding. “That’s really *good* Thian, I think you *got* it.”

Everyone smiles, then Amanda says, “So, this means, that looking at the lines of the symbol, and setting the dials from *right* to left... we set dial *one* to position six. Dial *two* to position four. Dial *three* to position *five*. Dial *four* to position three. Dial *five* to, well, position *five*, and dial *six* to position six, or *horizontal*. Is that it?”

Everyone agrees. Tianna says with a smile, “Well *Thian*, let’s see if you are *really* as smart as we *hope* you are. Go ahead and *set* the dials and let’s *see* what happens.”

Thian looks at the little dials for a moment, then with everyone verifying what position to turn the dial to, *before* he actually does, he reaches out and turns each dial in turn, hearing a little *clunk* with each turn. As he sets the last dial, there is a *clunk*, and then...

Nothing.

“Why didn’t something *happen*?” Thian asks looking puzzled while holding his hands out to the sides.

"I think we need to pull one of the handles on those *pedestals* first," Tia says now walking to the one on the right.

"Well, go *ahead* sis," Tianna says pointing to the handle, "give it a *go* and let's see what happens."

Tia hesitates, then says, "I think we better mount *up* again... *just* in case."

Thian is *on* his broom before she finishes her *sentence*. Everyone else then mounts up, Sadie drifting over to hover beside Tianna.

Tia reaches out and grabs onto the crossbar of the handle. Taking a deep breath, she *yanks* down. There is a *clunk*, followed by a deep *rumbling* sound.

Thian yells, "It's a *trap*, let's get *out* of here!" He then zooms past them in a *blur*. Amanda *screams* and shoots off right behind him, followed *quickly* by the others. They all fly through the open doorway and back along the tunnel for a short way, all hearts beating *wildly*.

"Wait!" Tianna shouts looking back over her shoulder as she slows to a stop. "I don't *hear* anything like a cave-in, and there's no *dust* cloud either. But *something* happened. *That's* for sure. Let's go back and *check* it out."

"Are you *crazy*?" Thian yells pointing down the tunnel. "*I'm* not going back in there!"

"*Fine*. You can just stay *here* then, but *I'm* going to go back and see what happened."

"*I'm* coming with you," Sadie says riding up alongside Tianna.

"See, *Sadie* isn't scared, and *she's* just a little kid," Tianna teases Thian. "Come on Sadie, let's see what *really* happened."

With that, the two of them slowly fly off down the tunnel and disappear into the larger cavern.

Thian is embarrassed, having watched the little *five-year* old girl flying off with Tianna, while *he* is sitting here on his broom *shaking*.

"*I'm* not afraid," Thian says softly, trying to keep his voice from cracking. "I just think we should have *waited* for a while is all."

"*I know* you're not afraid Thian," Amanda says as she tries to keep a straight face watching him shake. "But, I *think* we should go after them, *just* in case they need our help. And if they *do* need help, neither Tia nor me are as *strong* as you are, so, maybe *you* should lead the way okay?"

Thian *puffs* out his thin chest, and smiling, "Oh, yeah, *sure*. You're right, they *might* need my help. *Come* on, but stay *behind* me, just in *case*."

Thian shoots past Tia and Amanda, who both put a hand to their mouths stifling laughs. As they head off after Thian, Tia says, "That was really *nice* of you, you know. Thian *means* well... he's just, just..."

"Just *Thian*?" Amanda says with a laugh as they make their way into the larger cavern.

As Amanda and Tia reenter the cavern with the dials, they are *surprised* to see Tianna, Sadie and Thian, hovering over where the lower *right* petal of the huge Pentagram on the floor, has *risen*, revealing hidden *stairways* leading down on all three sides of the hole. There is a *dull* blue light coming from the stairs leading down.

"Wow!" Amanda says, as she and Tia dismount and stand beside Thian and Sadie, who have dismounted as well. Tianna is still hovering on her broom, directly over the hole. "Look at *that*, a hidden *stairway* inside the petals of the Pentagram. What do you think's *down* there?"

"Don't know," Tianna says drawing her wand. "But, there's only *one* way to find out, so, pull your wands and let's have a *look* and see."

“Wait!” Amanda says looking to one of the other petals. “There are *five* petals you know? And there are *five* squiggly symbols on the medallion. We only set the dials to how the lines were on the *first* squiggle.”

“Yeah, so?” Tianna asks.

“So,” Amanda continues, “I think that if we set the dials to match the *other* symbols on the medallion, we can get the *other* petals to open too. There *might* be stairs under each of them you know?”

“Actually, she may be *right*,” Tia says thoughtfully. “And the writing on the other medallion says, ‘*choose well*.’ It could have been *warning* us to choose the *right* stairway or something.”

“Yeah, well, that’s *great*,” Tianna says. “But as far as we *know*, this *may* be the only one that actually *opens*, and if we somehow *close* it... who *knows* if it will *open* again. I say, since it’s open *now*, we have a look and at least *see* what’s down there.”

They all look to one another for a moment, then Thian says, “Well, okay. It can’t hurt to just take a *look* anyway. I mean, nothing came *running* out of there after us.”

Tia shrugs as they all pull their wands and hold them at the ready.

Tianna maneuvers her broom and begins to float down the stairs, with the others now following on foot. As they get several steps down the stairs, Thian says quickly, “Hey, *wait!*”

“*Now* what Thian?” Tianna asks with a deep sigh stopping in a hover.

“What if we go down there, and, like Tianna *said*, what if the petal *closes* and we’re *trapped* down there? I think one of us should stay up *here*, and if the petal *closes*, they can at least *try* to open it again. I mean, what if it’s on some kind of *timer* or something. Or, you step on one of these steps, and it triggers a *trap* or something that *closes* the petal? There could even be a *proximity* spell in here somewhere, that will trigger a trap. We could be *trapped* down here and, and, *suffocate* or *drown* or something.”

“Actually, he’s got a *point*,” Tia says nodding. “Okay, you stay on *top* Thian, just in case. I mean, it was *your* idea and all. Here. Here’s the drawings of the *dials* and symbols.”

“Uh, *yeah*, okay, sure.”

Thian takes the pad of paper then walks a few steps back up the stairs to the top, and takes a few steps away from the petal. After a few nervous looks, Tianna once again begins to float down the hole, the others walking with tentative steps down the staircase, looking for any *writing* on the steps or walls. Sadie, is closely following behind Tianna, who is in the lead.

The hole is *deep*, but *narrows* as it descends, until the stairs on all three sides meet at a large, *ancient* metal door at the very bottom.

“Have you *found* anything?” a small echoing voice from high above sounds.

“We found some kind of a *metal* door at the bottom,” Amanda shouts up to Thian. “It’s in the *middle* of the wall on the *right* side of the point, if you were looking at it from the *outside* of the circle up *there* that is. There’s no red *mist* coming from it or anything. We’re going to *open* it and see what’s inside.”

“Well,” Tianna says holding her wand out in front of her, “get ready for *whatever* might be in there, and let’s get this door open. Amanda, do your *door* thing.”

Amanda steps up to the door, lifts her broom saying, “Orathian!”

There are *clanking* sounds which make their way up the door. The solid metal door *pops* open about three inches.

Everyone *freezes* in place, listening intently.

Nothing. No sound, no mist coming through the crack, no *screams* or howling. *Nothing* at all.

“Oh, I don’t like the *looks* of this,” Amanda says tilting her head slightly to listen some more. “Every time I’ve found a *thick* door, there was *always* something on the other side that tried to *get* me.”

Tianna, hovering just above them says, “Yeah, well. Okay Amanda, *yank* that thing open and everybody get ready to *shoot* anyway.”

Amanda grabs the large bronze ring with both hands, her wand also *clutched* in her right hand, and yanks hard. To everyone’s *surprise*, the door swings open *quickly*, the weight and momentum *almost* knocking Amanda over.

It is *pitch* black on the other side. It is like the dim blue light around them is not illuminating *anything* on the other side of the doorway.

“That’s *weird*. Ignite your wands,” Tia says in a whisper.

As their wands begin to glow in a soft blue from their tips, Amanda swings the door fully open, let’s go of the brass ring, and walks *right* up to what appears to be a veil of *solid* darkness. Holding her wand up, she *gasps* with surprise, “It’s *still* solid *black*! Our *wand* light isn’t lighting anything at *all*. What’s going *on*?”

“*Shut* the door, *quick*!” Tianna yells.

Startled, as Tia grabs the edge of the door and begins to push it shut, a *solid* black arm reaches through the *impenetrable* wall of darkness. A cold, *inky* hand grasps Amanda by the ankle, *yanking* her part way into the *nothingness* on the other side of the door. Amanda’s legs are *pulled* apart, her body leaning *hard* away from the dark doorway.

Amanda *screams* as do the others. Sadie *grabs* Amanda’s nearest hand, while Tia grabs Amanda by that same arm.

Everyone is screaming, even *Thian* from far above, as he *frantically* shouts down to them to tell him what is happening.

Tianna fires *bolt* after bolt of spells into the *darkness* around Amanda, where she thinks the *body* of the grasping arms may be. They simply *disappear* as soon as they strike the darkness.

Amanda is now *half* in the dark and *half* in the light of the black doorway. Where her body goes through the doorway, she simply *disappears* completely into darkness, as though that *part* of her had been cut away.

In a moment, two *more* arms come through the dark void. Arms as dark as *death* wrap around Amanda’s waist, as other hands reach through and *grab* her by the leg and arm. In a *flash*, Amanda is hoisted *up* into the air about *head* height to the others, and *yanked* away from Sadie and Tia. Amanda *screams* loudly as she is pulled *fully* into the darkness as Sadie *almost* tumbles in after her, as black arms *reach* for her.

The very *second* Amanda’s head enters the dark, her screams are *instantly* cut off, and she is *gone*.

“Amanda!” they all cry in unison.

“Amanda!” they yell again looking into the solid darkness.

*Dozens* of arms suddenly *lunge* through the doorway, hands *grasping* blindly in all directions.

“*Shut* the door!” Tianna yells, “*Shut* the *Bogey*’s door! They’re trying to get *all* of us!”

Tia and Sadie had fallen to the side as Amanda had been *yanked* from their grips. Tia *scrambles* to her feet and to the side, as Sadie begins to get up, but not quite *quick* enough. A dark, *cold* hand grabs Sadie by the ankle and begins *dragging* her through the doorway. Part of Sadie’s leg looks *missing* where it has entered the void.

Both Tianna and Tia *scream* at the sight. Tia grabs hold of Sadie's *hands* and tries to pull her free from the unseen *monster* within the darkness.

Tianna fires *three* more spells into the darkness, but with *no* effect.

"Tianna, *help*, I can't *hold* her!"

Tia is slowly being *dragged* toward the darkness along with Sadie, who has now *disappeared* up to her waist. Sadie is *completely* horizontal. Black hands are desperately trying to *pull* her into the dark, Tia leaning back, digs her *heels* into the dirt, *straining* to keep Sadie on this side of the door, as Sadie *screams* in utter terror.

"Help! *Please...* *do* something, don't let them *take* me!" Sadie screams again and again.

Tianna quickly drops down on her broom, almost knocking poor Tia to the floor. Tianna reaches down and *grabs* hold of Sadie's arm at the wrist, Tia holding on just a little beyond that. Just as Tianna gets a good grip, Sadie *disappears* into the darkness, only her *fingers*, wrist and a short portion of her *one* arm now on this side of the doorway. Tianna and Tia grunt and *strain* to keep hold of her.

Tianna *screams* as Sadie's hand slips through the darkness, taking part of Tia's hand with it. As another black hand appears through the darkness and reaches for Tia's wrist, Tianna *cranks* the throttle on her broom, yanking Tia *so* hard, she falls *backward* onto the ground.

Sadie comes *flying* through the darkness, *screaming* as her face appears, followed by the rest of her, then *drops* to the ground next to Tia, as Tianna lets go of her, *swerving* around on her broom to face them.

Tia jumps up, *spins* around grabbing the side of the open door. She begins *struggling* to close it. Sadie comes to her side and *together*, they push with *all* their might. But the black arms and *hands* are pressing back. It is *impossible* to close the door.

"Tianna, *do* something!" Sadie shouts.

Tianna, still pointing her wand at the door, looking scared half to death, suddenly creases her brows and yells, "*Neldor!*" The door instantly *slams* shut. Several of the dark arms are *severed* from their Bogey bodies and drop to the floor, turning into *nothing* but two dimensional *shadows*, *slithering* quickly back under the door and disappearing. Clanks are heard working their way down the edge of the door as it locks.

Everything goes *deathly* quiet but for their heavy breathing and crying. Then Thian's frantic shouting again comes from overhead. "Would somebody *please* tell me what by the *Oak* and *Ash* is going *on*?"

"Grab your *brooms* and let's get the heck *out* of here," Tianna yells. "Grab *Amanda's* broom too."

Sadie mounts her broom as Tia grabs Amanda's, then mounts her own. The three of them quickly *shoot* up the stairway.

Thian has to *duck*, as they come shooting up the side of the stairs he is standing on.

As the three shoot over Thian's head, "*Close* the petal Thian! *Do* it... *now!*" Tianna yells.

"I don't know *how* to close the petal! Where's *Amanda*? What's *happened*?"

"Try pulling that *other* handle," Tianna yells frantically, as she and the others *swerve* to a hover a few yards away. "*Quick* Thian, *try* the other handle! *NOW!*"

Thian runs for the pedestal with the handle, trips and falls *flat* on his face, skidding for some distance. Scrambling quickly to his feet, he sprints to the far handle and *yanks* hard.

There is a *clunk* followed by rumbling. Everyone turns quickly to the open petal, and watch *wide-eyed* as the petal slowly lowers and *seals* the stairway shut.

Panting hard, *completely* out of breath and *scared* to death, seeing the others *crying*, Thian begins crying too, not understanding *what* is going on, “What’s *happened*? *Where’s* Amanda? Why isn’t she *with* you?”

Everyone is crying hard. They look to Tianna, who is *wiping* her eyes on her sleeve.

She manages only to say in a kind of *daze*, staring at the now sealed petal, “The *Bogey*. The *Bogeymen* got Amanda. The *Shadow People* of the Dark, have *taken* her away.”

## The Bogey

[To TOC](#)



As Amanda is *yanked* through the open doorway, her friends disappear as everything goes black, and the first thing she notices is that the *cries* from her friends have also been *instantly* cut off. She can only hear her *own* screams and cries, and the laughter and strange *cackling* sounds coming from the darkness all around her.

She feels several hands hoist her *high* into the air, pressing against her *back*, head, *arms* and legs. Whoever has her begins carrying her away, into complete and *total* blackness.

Amanda grips tightly to her wand, which it is no longer giving off any light at all. She cries, “Lumino!” again and again, but *no* light flares from the tip of her wand.

A deep rumbling voice sounds beside her, “Your *wand* will not save you *here* child. But you may *keep* it if you like. You now *belong* to the Bogey. There is *no* known power here which can *harm* us.” There are hideous laughs all around her, as she is continuously jostled as she is taken further into the stifling darkness.

“But, but there’s no such *thing* as Bogeymen,” Amanda stammers meekly. “That’s just a *story*, to *scare* little kids...”

“Really? Well, if that were *true*,” comes another voice close by, “you’d be back with your little *friends*, and we would not have *you* in our grasps. Does *this* feel like we do not exist?”

Amanda screams as she is *pinched* hard on her leg. The Bogey *howl* with laughter.

Amanda is so scared, she *almost* passes out, then hears one of the Bogey say loudly, “*Summon* Atrum Umbra. He’ll want to meet our newest *guest*. Perhaps he’ll even *present* her all dressed up for *dinner*.” The Bogey roar with more laughter.

Amanda asks in a very frightened voice, “Who’s Atrum Umbra? Where are you *taking* me? Put me *down*!” Amanda begins to *thrash* and is gripped tighter by hands completely unseen.

“Atrum Umbra is the *king* of the Bogey,” a deep booming voice sounds from directly below her. “We are taking you into the *Deep*, to *forever* be our slave. You will *never* see but the dimmest of light again - *just* enough so you can do what we wish, but no more. You will *serve* us

to the *end* of your days. And put you *down* we will child. *Down* within the Deep, where you will *never* find your way out of the darkness that surrounds you.”

“No, *Please!*” Amanda begs, “I want to go *home!* Please put me *down*, let me *go!*”

“Oh, well, since you said *Pleeeese*, that makes all the *difference*, don’t it *boys?*” This brings more terrifying laughter, and the Bogey begin to sing;

In the dark the Bogey come, beneath your bed to do you harm,  
In closets Bogey sit and wait, and while you sleep, we seal your fate,  
In shadows long, or short or tall, we wait to snatch the children all,  
The shadows between the trees you see, be moved by wind? Nay Bogey be,  
From corner of your eye you see, a movement but there nothing be,  
But Bogey move through shadows quick, we wait to snatch you in a lick,  
To darkness take you Bogey will, to spend your life in darkest well,  
To Bogey land you now will go, to spend your life within a hole,  
Forever trapped within the dark, you’ll die of fright your heart won’t start,  
In Bogey land your fate be sealed, in darkest terror you’ll be killed,  
To Bogey land we now must go, with newest child now in tow,  
Escape you’ll try but fail you will, you’re trapped inside the Bogey hill...

They sing this again and again, as they move quickly without any sound of footfall at all. The only sounds from the Bogey are their deep and *booming* voices, thundering from the darkness.

“*Stop* your squirming! Or we’ll *tear* you apart *limb* from limb, and *eat* you right here and be *done* with you!” shouts the one directly below her, pinching her *hard* again.

Amanda *gasps* as she stiffens, breathing very heavily, eyes darting all around her, she tries *desperately* to stop crying. She swallows hard and does her best to stay as *still* as possible.

After what seems a good half hour, Amanda hears a faint *drumming* coming from what the Bogey had called the *Deep*.

The drumming becomes louder and *louder* over the next several minutes, until it is *thundering* in her ears. Soon, Amanda knows they are passing whoever, or *whatever*, are pounding the drums. Those beating the deep and resonant drums begin to sing;

To the Deep, the Deep, to the Deep the child goes,  
Down, down, how far she’ll never know,  
The Bogey like to bite and hit,  
To kick you in the gloom,  
We’ll toss you in the deepest pit,  
And there you’ll meet your doom.  
With the Shadow People now you’ll stay,  
To serve to our delight,  
In darkness you’ll forever stay,  
Forsake the dreadful light.  
To the Deep, the Deep, to the Deep the child goes,  
Down, down, how far she’ll never know,  
The Bogey like to bite and hit,  
To kick you in the gloom,  
We’ll toss you in the deepest pit,

And there you'll meet your doom...

Amanda is shaking *so* violently, she almost loses her bladder.

In an instant, the drumming *stops*. Amanda is roughly *dropped* on what feels like a rough cavern floor, and lands painfully on her bottom.

Silence.

The only things Amanda can hear are her *shuddering* breaths, and the sniffs she is making as her nose runs from crying. Her heart pounds *hard* in her chest, as she even feels it beat in her *throat*.

There may be silence all around her, but she knows they are still there. She can *feel* many unseen eyes on her, making the *hairs* on the back of her neck stand on end.

Amanda slowly gets to her feet. Standing there for a few moments, eyes wide and *straining* to see *anything* at all in the darkness, she listens.

Amanda has *never* been afraid of the dark before. It had become her *friend* when she had spent her years at the orphanage back on the earth realm. She would sneak down to the basement, and *hide* within the utility closet she had made her sanctuary. She remembers how she would go down there, shut herself into the *dark*, where she would be *safe* from the other kids who picked on her, and would kick and punch her whenever they could.

She remembers how *dark* the closet had been, in the already dark basement. That closet had been as dark as *death*, and yet, it had become her protector. She always felt *safe* within the dark.

But now, something *else* was in the darkness with her... something that *loves* the darkness as she had.

But here, that something was... *evil*.

Amanda dares not move. She stands rooted in place, eyes wide and darting all around her, she strains *harder* to see any light at all, or perhaps a moving *change* in the darkness, showing where her captors stood watching her.

Suddenly a voice booms right behind her, "*Boo!*"

Amanda *screams*, jumps, and *spins* around, pointing her wand out in front of her. She waves it to the left, then the right, but there is nothing there to *shoot* a spell at, even if her wand *worked*. Her heart is *pounding* so hard, she thinks it may *burst*, and she will die *right* there from fright.

Laughter erupts all around her, making her spin in all directions, waving her wand wildly.

She feels a cold hand *slap* against her right shoulder, and *jumps* away from the touch with another scream, spinning to face where it had come from.

Darkness. Laughter.

She is shoved *hard* in the back and falls to the cavern floor, then is *kicked* hard in her left leg. Amanda *cries* out in surprise and pain, snatching her leg to her.

"*Stop* it!" Amanda cries. "*Stop* it! What do you *want*? Why are you *doing* this to me?"

A new voice sounds to her left. It is very deep and *booms* within the cavern she is in. The voice seems to be *high* above her, she guesses some eight to ten feet.

"What do we *want*?" the voice mocks. "Why *you* of *course* child. Children are *always* what we want, but sometimes, those that are *older* serve our purpose just as well."

"Purpose? *What* purpose?" Amanda stammers, "What do you want with... *me*?"

"Our purpose," the voice says as it seems to be drifting slowly around her, still at the same height as before, "is to *snatch* the children of the realms, and take them to the *Deep*. There, we *bite*, hit, kick, punch and *frighten* them into doing our will."

“You will join the others and *serve* us till you *die* from old age, or *fright*. Generally, the *latter*. You see, *we* are the *Shadow People*, who are known by *many* names on *many* realms.

“You and *all* living creatures, have seen us *many* times, or *felt* our presence. We lay *waiting* under your bed at night, until you put your *feet* down, then, we reach out and *grab* you by the ankles. We *snatch* you under the bed and take you into the Deep *forever* - no one ever knowing *what* happened to you but *thinking* that perhaps... you simply *ran* away, or were *kidnaped*.

“Why, you read all the *time*, where children go *missing*, never to be *seen* or heard from again. Although, sometimes, we *will* return their *worthless* bodies to their realm, *after* they die in the Deep. Many *innocent* men, and some *women*, are *charged* with their deaths, and sent to prisons, even... sentenced to *death*. When all along, it was *us*... the *Bogey* who were responsible. It pleases us greatly, to see those *innocent* suffer.

“We hide in the *closets* behind closed doors, waiting amongst the darkness and *shadows* of the clothing. Yes, *you* see us only as *shadows*, but we are *much* more.

“You *know* we are there... you can *feel* us... somehow, *sense* us. We are the *Bogey*, the *Shadow People* of the Deep. We *change* our shadow form to fit whatever’s near... the *shape* of a tree, a *rock*, bush or *mountain*. We are the *shadows* made by *toys* and lurk behind doors, *scurry* behind the surfaces *lit* by lanterns, *candle* light and *anything* bright.

“You have seen us *many* times before child. *All* children have -out of the *corner* of your eyes. You see a *movement*, turn quickly to see what it is. But there’s *nothing* there. Whatever it was, is *gone*. We, the *Bogey*, are *always* near, especially near *children*, waiting for our chance to *snatch* you when you least expect it. Yes child, you have *seen* us *many* times, *just* from the corner of your eyes as you read, *stare* at things, or are just sitting and *thinking*. We are *always* present... *waiting*.

“You have seen us *many* times, moving within the *darkness* of the trees. *You* think the *shadows* which move there are from the *branches*, within some *harmless* breeze. But no. It is *us*, the *Bogey*, the *Shadow People* of the Deep, come to see what *foolish* creature will pass our way, so we can *snatch* them into the ground, *forever* to dwell within the dark of the Deep.

“We *sneak* amongst you, silent as *ghosts* riding on the wind, ever present *wherever* light may cast us, or in the *absence* of any light at all. Although we be *bound* forever, *light* with dark, *darkness* is the more powerful. In the darkness, you find little or *no* light at all, and *lose* your way, your *mind*, and *will* to live. To you, it is *cold* there within the dark. You feel the fear *prickle* on the back of your neck. The *hairs* on your arms stand up. You *tremble*. You are *afraid* to move, and the *slightest* of sounds make your heart *race*.

“The darkest *demons* rise from the depth of your *own* mind, monsters so *hideous*, so *vile*, your very *soul* screams. They will *never* leave you alone, *here* in the dark. Here within the dark of the Deep, you will *stay* forever, *alone*, until you go *mad*, unless you *submit* to become our slave, and *serve* us till your end.

“But we are not only found *here*, within the Deep. *Wherever* there is light, and a *shadow* be cast, a *Shadow Person* lurks, however *faint* or small their shadow form may be.

“You cannot *walk*, sit, *stand*, lay, jump, *tumble*, skip or *dive*, without *us* being there with you... *watching* you... *waiting*.

“It matters not how *fast* you can run from us child, because when you look *down*, you’ll find *us* right there with you, *just* as fast, the *Bogey* in our *shadow* form, matching *your* form and speed. When you are *alone* child, and *no* others can see, *that* is when we *snatch* you... if we please. Or we may simply wish to *frighten* you, and make you *think*, hear and *see* things, which you know *not* from where they come, nor go.

“Should we *snatch* you, we can take you down through the *slightest* of cracks or crevices, and *forever* lock you in the *deepest* of darkness... the ever present *gloom*, of the Deep... *forever* to serve us till your last, *shuddering*, frightened breath.

“I am called *many* things in many realms, but Atrum Umbra I am called here. *I* am the *king* of the Bogey. You are *ours* now child, to *do* with as we please. To  *dwell* within the darkness with us... *forever*, should you *behave*. If *not*? It’s into the darkest of *pits* with you, where the *creatures* from your own *mind* will come to life, driving you *mad*, until your end.

“We’ll *deal* with her later,” Atrum Umbra thunders. “I’m told there were *other* children with her. Regroup, *spread* out through every *crack* and crevice and *snatch* them all! Toss *her*, into the *pit*!”

Amanda is grabbed by unseen hands and lifted quickly. She *screams* as one of the unseen Bogey begins to run with her, held *high* in the air. She thinks she hears a *door* opening somewhere close by, then the faint sounds of yelling, *screaming*, and crying somewhere in the distance, which *suddenly* stops.

The one carrying her comes to a sudden stop, lowering her slightly.

“Don’t let the vicious *creatures* of the Deep *bite* you now,” a hideous voice whispers in her ear.

Amanda is *thrown* to the ground, where she lands hard on her right knee, making her cry out in *mind* numbing pain, tears *streaking* down her cheeks. She is then *kicked* hard in the back, which sends her tumbling forward and down some steep, *rough* and jagged embankment, screaming in *terror* as she tumbles.

Down... *down*... further into the *inky* blackness of the Deep.

Amanda eventually comes to a *painful* stop at the bottom of what she *knows* is a very deep pit indeed.

Scared, bruised, *cut* and bleeding, all alone and *shivering*, Amanda cries as she hears the *horrible* laughter far above her. There is silence for just a few heartbeats, before she hears the *squeak* of a door which *slams* closed with its echo *reverberating* around her, then fading quickly into silence.

Amanda lays perfectly still, thinking about what the Bogey said about *vicious* creatures being down here with her. It is *indeed* as dark as death in there, and she knows, if she does *not* find a way out, death *will* surely take her, here in the *bowels* of some mountain within a mountain.

She strains to hear anything at all.

Silence.

Amanda listens for a few more moments, then slowly feels around on the cavern floor for her wand, which she dropped when she had tumbled down into the pit. As her fingers glide over the rough surface, she is *praying* she will not touch something that may *bite* or attack her, or, grasp the *bones* of some other kid who had died and *rotted* into nothing but a skeleton down here.

Her fingers soon *tap* against something wooden, which rolls slightly away as she gives a short gasp. She reaches out quickly, realizing what it is. Touching it again, she grasps it *tightly*, and lifts it close to her face.

“Lumino,” she whispers to the tip of her wand.

Nothing.

Amanda sits up. Pulling her legs to her chest, wrapping her arms around them, she rests her forehead on her knees. Trembling, she begins *rocking* back and forth, trying to calm herself. Crying softly, not wanting to attract any hidden *creatures* to her, tears continue streaming down her cheeks.

Amanda, *terrified*, curls into a tight ball. She is *alone* in the darkness of the pit.  
Or... *is* she?

## The Second Petal

[To TOC](#)

“The... the *Shadow People* got Amanda?” Thian asks with eyes wide, turning quickly to face the now tightly sealed petal of the huge Pentagram.

“How? What *happened*?” Thian continued. “Why didn’t you *save* her?”

“We *tried*!” Tia cries animatedly, still in tears. “Amanda opened that *huge* metal door. There was nothing there but solid *darkness*!”

“We lit our wands, but the *light* didn’t go through the darkness of the open door,” Sadie says now standing beside Tianna, who is hovering just above the cavern floor. “It was *darker* than the *darkest* dark I’ve ever *seen* too!”

“Amanda walked *right* up to the darkness with her wand lit,” Tia says, looking at Thian’s tear streaked face. “She was *grabbed* by the ankle, and they started *pulling* her into the darkness. Sadie and I *grabbed* her, while Tianna fired several *spells* at them, but it didn’t *do* any good. The spells just went *right* through them, like they weren’t even *there*!”

“Arms, *blacker* than tar, lifted Amanda up over our heads. We *couldn’t* hold on to her anymore! She was *snatched* from our hands and *yanked* into the darkness... and disappeared.”

“They tried to get *Sadie* too,” Tianna says wiping her nose on her sleeve as she nods to Sadie.

Thian gasps. “What? They, they almost got *you* too Sadie?”

“Yeah, they *did*! They were pulling *me* into the dark, and *Tia* was trying to pull my out.”

“Tianna fired several *shots* into the dark like before, but again, *nothing* happened,” Tia says sniffing loudly. “Sadie went *through* into the darkness too, with only a little of her *arm* and hand on this side. Then the Bogey reached out for *me*. Tianna *grabbed* hold and used the *thrust* from her broom to pull me away *just* in time, yanking *Sadie* back onto this side too.”

“Tianna then said that *word* Amanda uses to shut the door,” Sadie says wide-eyed. “We mounted up and *flew* up here. Then *you* shut the petal.”

“By the *moons*!” Thian says in shock. “How are we gonna get her back?”

“Get her *back*?” Tianna quips. “From the *Bogey*? Are you *kidding*? No one’s *ever* come back from the Bogey... *ever*! Once they have you, that’s *it*, *game* over! They say that you stay in the darkness as their *slave* till you *die* from fright, old age, or... *whatever*.”

“They can *eat* you too,” Sadie says with a shaky voice. “The *book* we read, said they *eat* kids too. The stories I’ve heard, say they make you their *slave* and, and *bite*, kick, *pinch* and always try to *scare* you. They make you dig *tunnels* so they can get to other places easier, without having to move only where the *light* may cast them, and to make more room for more *slaves*. I don’t know if the stories about them *eating* you are true or not though. *Are* they Tianna?”

“Well, no one can *really* be sure you know,” Tianna says looking to the closed petal. “Since *no* one has ever come *out* again once they snatch you. But, I heard that they will *sometimes* take one of the kids, *scare* them to death, then *prepare* them for dinner... they call it ‘*dressing* them up and *presenting* them for dinner.’ At least that’s what we were told in *class*. Maybe, well, maybe *that’s* what they’re going to do with Amanda.”

“Don’t *say* that!” Thian yells angrily. “There *has* to be a way. We can’t just... *leave* her *down* there with them! We *have* to do something!”

“Yes, I *know*. I want to save her too. But, do something like *what* Thian?” Tianna shouts back, truly frightened for Amanda, but not knowing *what* to do. “If you’re so *brave*, why don’t you just open the petal, and go *down* there and get her *back* then?”

Tianna and Thian stare at one another red-faced. Tia says, “*Stop* it, the *both* of you! It’s not *helping*. She’s gone. We don’t know enough *about* the Bogey to be able to *plan* anything, and besides, we don’t know enough *Wizitch* to fight them if we *do* go back down there. We need to get help. We need to get someone *high* in their Order to help us. What we need to do, is figure out a way to get *out* of here and get some *help*. Where or *how* we get it, I have no idea, but we need to find *someone* to help us!”

“She’s right you know,” Sadie says nodding. “The best way we can help Amanda, is to get some *powerful* witches and wizards to help us. I don’t think *Bellinora* is still here. She said she would hold those men for a while, then she and *Jasmine* would leave.”

“We need to get some help, those *Bogey* have her now, and we don’t know *what* they have in mind for her,” Tia says with a sniff.

“Yeah, well... I guess you’re right,” Thian says now turning to look to the closed petal. “But, how *did* you see them? I thought the Bogey were just *shadows* to our eyes. How did you see them like, like in their *solid* form? You know, actual *arms* and hands and all?”

“*Wand* light,” Sadie says fingering the wand now back in its holster. “We read about it in class. Only *wand* light can show the *Shadow People* in their true form - something to do with *wavelength* and such.”

“Then, why didn’t your wand light penetrate the *darkness* on the other side of the door?” Thian asks puzzled.

“Because it’s *their* domain on the other side,” Sadie continues. “We read that, should the Bogey be *out* of their own domain, *wand* light will reveal their *true* three dimensional forms. But if they’re in *their* domain, wand light has *no* effect, and you can’t see them at all, unless they are in light *cast* at the same wavelength as wandlight. I don’t remember the *whole* thing, but, it said something about a *spell* having been cast eons ago, by the *first* Wielder. I guess it was that *Eris* lady. The story said the Wielder created a *powerful* spell that would give the darkness *life* - a life that *thrived* where no light could reach.

“It said that the *life* forms were given the ability to become *shadow*, and would accompany *light* wherever it chose to cast them, you know, like *behind* something the light hits. The *Shadow People*, when in the light, don’t have the *strength* to do much of anything, just *hide* or follow the thing casting them. Sometimes, it said in our *book*, that the *shadow* would *trip* you, making you think that you *tripped* over your own *feet*... but it was really *them*, using their *energy* to trip and scare you. They think it’s *funny*.

“The *weaker* the shadow form they take, the *weaker* their strength. You always know how *strong* they are, it said, by looking at the *shadow*. If it’s a really *dark* shadow, like you see in the dense forest between the *trees*, under your *bed* or in a *closet*, especially at *night*, and stuff like that, they are *very* strong, and can *snatch* you and take you away if you get too close.

“If the shadow is *weak* looking, and kind of *washed* out, like on a really overcast day, they’re very weak and can’t do anything at all, but wait for you to get to someplace *dark*, where *they* become strong. And I guess *spells* don’t work on them either, at least not in their *own* domain, because Tianna fired some really *nasty* ones, and nothing happened.

“Our book said too, that sometimes, you wake up in the *middle* of the night, or even in the morning, and you can’t *move* at all. Like... like you’re *paralyzed* or something. You *want* to move and open your eyes, but you *can’t*. That’s happened to *me* lots of times. That’s when I *know* the Bogey have almost *got* me. But, somehow, I manage to *force* my eyes open, and move. It really *scares* me though.”

“Yeah, that’s happened to *me* too,” Tia says swallowing hard and nodding.

“Me too,” Both Thian and Tianna say at the same time. They all look at one another quite frightened, knowing that it was the *Bogey* who had tried to get them all, *many* times before, even back on their *own* realms.

“The thing is,” Sadie continues as she begins walking around Tianna in a circle. “The Bogey are sometimes the ones that *move* things you put down, moving them to *someplace* else, you know, like your *toys*? You put your toys on a *shelf* or on the floor, then go to bed, and the next day, they’ve *moved*.”

“I put *some* of the toys I had back home on a shelf, and put a part of the toy *right* over a chip in the wood I could see really good. Then the next morning, I’d go look, and the toy was either *someplace else*, or it wasn’t *exactly* over that spot where I had put it. *Lots* of witches and wizards put something down, walk away, then come back and can’t *find* it. That’s happened to *everyone* I’ve ever met. You *know*?”

“Yeah, that’s happened to us *millions* of times,” Thian says nervously. “We’re *always* talking about putting something down, then we go back and can’t *find* it. Usually we *do* find it again, but most of the time, it’s not where we *know* we put it. You mean, *all* this time, it’s been... the *Bogey*?”

“Yeah. Well, at least that’s what it said in our *book*,” Sadie says as she stops walking and looks at Thian. “Well... them and the *Jinnie*. A couple others too I think, who do the *same* thing, but like to do it during the *day*, in full daylight.”

“What do you think will *really* happen to Amanda?” Thian asks.

Tia and Tianna give each other a nervous look, then look at Sadie.

“Well, like I *said*, I don’t *know* really,” Sadie says in a small voice looking down to the floor.

“Sadie, what did it say the Bogey do with the kids they get, *honestly*?” Tianna asks with a shaky voice.

“Uh, well, again, nobody *knows* for sure you know, like you said, since no one’s *ever* come back from the dark, once the *Shadow People* get them. But, well...”

“What Sadie?” Tia asks stepping closer. “What *else* did you read?”

Sadie has tears flowing from her eyes again as she says, “It said that the *Wielder* who gave them life, made them a deal. That they could have *all* the children and *creatures* they could snatch, and do with them *whatever* they want, if *they* would do whatever *she* asked them to do when she needed them. It said the Bogey agreed, and would *snatch* kids as they dangled their *feet* over the edge of their bed, or tried to *stand* up to go to the potty in the middle of the night. Or, the Bogey would wait in a *closet* until the kid fell asleep. Then they would come out and snatch you *right* out from your bed, run into the closet, and *disappear* with you forever into the dark. Or, they would wait for you to open your closet in the *dark* and then *grab* you. They would take you down to something called the *Deep*.”

“The... the *Deep*?” Thian says licking his lips, forcing down a swallow.

“Yeah,” Sadie continues. “It said the Deep is where the *Bogey* live, deep within the ground in *huge* caverns. That the Deep is *so* dark, that you could *never* find the end of it - like it just went deeper and *deeper*, forever.

“They would keep the kids and make them their *slaves*, having them dig other *tunnels* and doing, well, I don’t know what... I don’t think anyone *really* does. It *did* say that the Bogey had to *eat* meat sometimes. *That* was part of the spell. So, the Bogey *eat* a lot of the kids like I said, but, again, no one knows if that’s *true* for sure, because no one has ever come *back* once they get you.”

They all look at one another nervously for a few moments, then Thian says, “But, why didn’t Amanda use the *necklace*? Why didn’t it *save* her?”

“Don’t know,” Tia says now leaning on the console. “But it still *might* you know. I mean, Amanda would have been *killed* by Blaine, but the necklace took over and she became, well, she became...”

“The *Wielder of Power*,” Tianna says drifting over to Tia. “But you *might* be right sis. Maybe if the necklace thinks she’s in *real* trouble, like, she’s actually *going* to be killed or something, then the necklace will *wake* up, or *whatever* it does, and save her.”

“Yeah? Well then *why* didn’t it try to save her, and *us*, when we were trapped under the *water* back near the face? *Remember?*” Thian says a little more forcefully than he intended. “If it weren’t for *Sadie*, we’d be *dead*... Amanda too.”

“Hey, *I* don’t know Thian!” Tianna shoots back, “Why are you mad at *me*? We did our *best* to *save* her you know. You think *you* could have done any *better?*”

“Huh? Oh, *no*... no. Sorry, I’m not blaming *you*, I’m just really *scared* and worried about Amanda is all. *I* don’t know what to do either. I just wish the *necklace* would have... done *something!*”

“Well, like you said Thian, we need to get *out* of here,” Tia says looking at the dials on the console. “And as far as I know, these *dials* and the levers are the *only* things we know of that may lead us to a way out.”

“Oh *great!*” Tianna snorts. “I wonder what we’ll find *waiting* for us, if we manage to open *another* one of those petals! By the way, there’re *five* of them you know. And if any of the other four are as *bad* as this first one...”

“Yeah, I know,” Tia says now running a finger over the skull of one of the dials. “But, we have no other *choice* really, so...”

“Oh man... we’re in *big* trouble,” Thian says shaking his head.

“Well, we need to do *something* and we’re wasting *time!*” Tia says looking at the large medallion with the squiggly symbols on it. “I say, we give these other symbols a *try* and see what happens. But I think we better keep our *wands* at the ready, and *blast* anything we see... before *they* get *us*. Thian, *draw* out the dials again and number them okay? Then draw and break apart the symbols like you did before, and let’s *spin* these dials and see what we get.”

“Oh, uh, sure,” Thian says drawing his wand. He gives it a *swish* and an orange bolt shoots out the end, bending to one side, and *instantly* sets his *broom* on fire, which is lying on the cavern floor a short distance away.

“*Extingo!*” Tianna shouts pointing her wand at Thian’s broom, instantly extinguishing the flames. “By the Oak and *Ash* Thian, don’t we have *enough* trouble without you setting things on *fire* all the time? *Here!*”

Tianna waves her wand as Thian puts his away, looking very embarrassed as he mumbles something to himself. A pad of paper and a pen appear in Tianna’s hand. She *throws* them at Thian, hitting him in the chest.

“Well? *Pick* ‘em up and do something *useful* for once *will* you!” Tianna shouts at him. “I’m gonna hover above the Pentagram, *just* in case you *do* get another petal open. If something comes up those stairs, I’m gonna shoot it *first* and ask it questions *later.*”

“I’m gonna come with you,” Sadie says mounting her broom and kicking off. “*Two* wands are better than *one* they always say. And I do know *some* spells and stuff.”

Tianna smiles as the little girl rises to hover beside her. “Yeah, I *know*... we *competed* together. You did some *really* great stuff too. Even saved my *butt*. You did great in the *battle* at

Anastasia's village too. Yeah, okay, come on, let's hover over the *center* so we can move quick to any of the petals if they open."

With that, Tianna and Sadie fly up and over the Pentagonagram, then hover high above it.

"*Okay* sis, whenever you're ready," Tianna calls down.

Thian finishes his drawing of the dials normal positions, then numbers them. He then breaks apart the other four squiggly symbols and numbers them, according to the number which represents their angle on the dials.

"*Got 'em* Tia," Thian says jogging to where Tia is standing, looking at the dials on the console.

"Okay Thian, tell me how to set the dials for the second symbol, and let's see what happens okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Thian says as he looks up to where Tianna and Sadie are now hovering, directly over the center of the Pentagonagram. They both have their wands out and at the ready. Tianna catches his eye and nods. Thian nods back then says, "Here's the sequence, *remember* it starts from the *right* side okay?"

Thian gives her the order in which to turn the dials. Tia spins each dial and as each time it comes to one of the six positions, it gives a *clank* as it snaps into place. She then turns it again and again, until it is in the proper position.

"Well, this is the *last* one for this symbol," Tia says glancing to Thian. She turns the last dial into position, and it *clanks* into place.

After Thian checks each one for what must have been the *fifth* time, Tianna shouts down, "By the Lord and *Lady*, Thian, just *pull* the darn *lever* and let's see what *happens*! Snarkins!"

Thian steps from the console, walking to his still smoking broom, picks it up and wipes off some of the *char* from the handle. "Uh, I think you and I should mount up too Tia, just in *case* you know."

Thian mounts his broom, kicks off, and then hovers. He watches Tia rise into the air, heading up to join Tianna and Sadie, drawing her wand as she rises. Thian slowly drifts over to the lever on the right side of the console.

Turning sideways, Thian puts his hand on the lever, looking to the others hovering far above the Pentagonagram. They all nod.

Thian, nodding back says, "Well, get *ready*, here *goes*." He yanks down on the handle which moves easily. There is a loud *clank* followed by a deep rumbling. Thian shoots up to join the others, pulling his wand as he goes.

Reaching the others, Thian swerves to a stop beside Tia. They all watch the second point of the petal on the right of the Pentagonagram, slowly rise. In a moment, it stops and everything falls quiet.

Hearts pounding, the kids all look to one another nervously.

"Do you *hear* anything?" Thian whispers.

"No. *You* sis?" Tia asks also in a whisper.

"No, *nothing*." Then looking at Sadie, Sadie shakes her head and shrugs.

"But remember, we didn't hear anything *last* time either," Tianna says softly, as she slowly descends toward the raised petal.

The others follow closely, coming to a hover over the huge open hole. Like the other petal, there is a stairway leading down into the darkness below. There is once again, a *dim* blue light coming from some of the steps.

"Well, okay. So *now* what?" Thian asks with a shaky voice.

“Like *last* time I guess,” Tianna says in a somewhat shaky voice of her own. “I mean, I think Tia, Sadie and I should go down and see what’s there. *You* Thian, get ready to close this thing as *fast* as you can okay?”

“Yeah, but, be *careful* okay?”

Tianna looks at Thian. Their eyes meet for a moment, then with a smile, Tianna nods and begins to float down the center of the hole, her wand already lit and at the ready.

Sadie descends right next to Tianna, with Tia following a short distance behind.

Thian flies quickly back to the lever on the left of the console. He dismounts holding his wand, then puts both hands on the lever, ready to *pull* as soon as his friends clear the hole, should they come *flying* back out.

“Well, it looks like there’s another *door* down there,” Tianna says as she continues to descend. “Do you two want to do this like last time? I mean, with *you* two opening the door and my hovering at the ready?”

“Not *really*,” Sadie says with a nervous laugh. “*Last* time they almost *got* me. But, we have a better chance with you above us, so, it’s up to *Tia* and me at the door. I hope Thian’s ready up there.”

“Well, I think that’s the *one* thing none of us have to worry about,” Tia says with a grin. “You can bet Thian has *both* hands on that lever, and is *sweating* like crazy. I just hope he doesn’t *close* it before we all get out.”

Tianna drifts to the left, so Tia and Sadie can drop past her, to where they hover right beside the huge *wooden* door. The door has some kind of metal *straps* running at odd angles across it, like reinforcements of some type.

“Can you pull that round bronze handle Tia... after I give the command to open the door that is?” Tianna asks.

Tia nods. “Sadie, maybe it would be better if you moved back some, so when I open the door, both you and Tianna will be ready to *shoot*, without you having to shoot around me. I’ll yank the door open, and then I’ll fly up to join the two of you.

“*Sis*... get ready to yell the closing spell the *second* you see something okay?”

“You *got* it.”

Sadie moves into position beside Tianna, pointing her wand at the door, ready for *whatever* may come charging out of it. Both Tianna and Sadie are ready to *grab* Tia, then fly her away from the door if she gets grabbed.

“Okay, *here* goes,” Tia says. “On *your* command *Sis*.”

“Orathian!” Tianna calls loudly. *Clanks* are heard working their way up the side of the door. In a moment, the door swings toward them about two inches.

Not waiting, Tia *yanks* hard as she and her broom move back with the swinging door.

Tianna and Sadie watch with eyes wide, hearts *pounding*, as the door swings wide.

A dirt and rock strewn pathway is all that can be seen on the other side. *Nothing* is waiting to attack them as far as they can see. They both lower their wand as Tia comes *swerving* to a stop beside them, heart racing.

“Well, at least it’s not solid *darkness*,” Tianna says leaning forward. “So, I guess we don’t have to worry about the *Bogey*.... for now.”

“Yeah, *great*, but who knows what *else* may be in there hiding,” Sadie says looking to Tianna.

“Tia, you better fly up and let Thian know what we *found* okay?” Tianna says as she and Sadie descend to the cavern floor and dismount.

Tia nods and shoots up the stairs to the opening calling, “Thian, it’s *okay*, don’t close the petal, we’re alright.”

When Tia rises up out of the hole, Thian is already mounting his broom. He heads off to meet Tia, who is hovering just over the hole.

“*What’d* you find?”

“Another *door*. *Wooden* with metal strapping. We opened the door, and it *looks* like the only thing on the other side, is a *pathway* leading into a kind of tunnel. It’s *dark* inside, but our wand light at least *lights* it. Come on, I’ll show you.”

They both descend the stairs on their brooms, then dismount and stand beside Tianna and Sadie, who are both standing just this side of the entrance.

“I think only one of us should take a look inside first,” Tianna says turning to the others.

“Yeah, I agree,” Thian says quickly. “No...*wait*, I think there should be *two* instead.”

“Oh *really*?” Tianna says rather sarcastically. “And just *why* should we risk *two* of us instead of one?”

“Because if *two* of us go,” Thian says motioning to the pathway, “*one* can fly in a few yards, then the *next* can follow by flying *backwards*. That way, there is *always* someone facing the front, and someone watching the *rear*, and *both* of them can watch the walls on either side. If anything happens, *one* of the two will know it in time to at least have a *chance* to defend themselves.”

“Actually, that’s a *great* idea!” Tia says nodding with a smile. “It makes a lot of *sense* you know?”

“But, *which* two of us?” Sadie asks looking really frightened.

“Well, Thian and I are the best *flyers*,” Tianna says nodding to Thian.

“Tianna,” Tia says seriously. “Listen. You two *are* the best flyers, true. And Tianna, you’re the best *shot* of any of us, and so I really think *you* should stay here and watch the doorway. I think it should be *Thian* and I that go. You and Sadie can either come in and help if something happens, and, if there’s time. Or, you need to get *out* and close the petal before whatever’s in there gets us *all*. Then keep *trying* to find another way out to get help.”

“I can go in too,” Sadie says peering into the darkness some distance down the pathway. “I, *I’m* not scared you know,” her eyes as big as her fists and her entire body shaking.

“We know you’re not,” Tianna says looking at the tiny girl, who is standing behind her, peering around her legs to look into the tunnel. “Maybe you’re right sis. Sadie and I’ll stay here. In fact, *I’ll* stay here by the door, and Sadie, you have the *bigger* job if you think you can do it... and that’s to fly up and get *ready* to pull down the lever, just as *fast* as you can when whoever flies up and tells you to *close* it, okay?”

“Yeah, *okay*, I can do it,” Sadie says with obvious relief. She hugs Tia and Thian, then hugs Tianna who is hovering just above the ground. “Be really *careful*! I’m gonna go up and get ready. I’ll wait for somebody to fly up. But, how *long* should I wait if none of you come back up?”

“Good question,” Thian says looking to his timepiece. “Let’s give it an hour, *max*. *Half* hour in, if we need that long, and *half* hour back. If we aren’t back in *exactly* one hour, *something’s* happened and you need to close and *lock* the door, then *seal* the petal. Then, well, you do whatever you *need* to, to get out.”

They all agree, and Sadie shoots up the stairs. Tianna takes her place a couple feet higher than where she has been hovering, so she can get the best vantage point along the darkened pathway.

"I'll go first," Thian says as he forces down a swallow. "Tia, give me... like *fifteen* to twenty feet, then you follow okay?"

"Okay, let's go, the waiting's driving me *nuts*."

Thian mounts up, and with wand lit and at the ready, heads into the tunnel and along the pathway.

Tia and Tianna watch as Thian moves further in, wand light illuminating the path and walls around him.

Tia nods to Tianna, then flips a small lever on her broom's handle, switching it into reverse. She begins moving along the pathway, wand lit and at the ready. She waves to Tianna who waves back, then looks over her shoulder to see where Thian is. He is about fifteen feet further along the pathway, head constantly shifting from side to side.

"Uh oh," Thian says after some twenty minutes of following the winding and curving pathway. "The path curves *sharply* off to the right just up ahead. I don't *like* this Tia."

"Well, we *have* to find a way out and get help for Amanda," Tia whispers. So, let's just keep *going* and see what happens okay? Time's running out. We'll have to head back soon."

Thian approaches the corner cautiously, then peers around it, wand shaking out in front of him.

Looking over her shoulder, Tia watches Thian slowly move around the corner and out of sight. After a short hesitation, she hears Thian *yell*. A second later, he comes *whizzing* past her, swerving to a stop only a few yards away from her, eyes *wide* with fright, wand held at the ready.

Tia flips her lever and shoots forward, *swerving* to a stop beside Thian, her own eyes wide and *waving* her wand out in front of her, ready for *whatever* is going to come *charging* around the corner after them. Her heart is pounding so hard her eyes hurt.

"*What?! What is it Thian? What did you see?*"

"I, I'm not *sure*," Thian pants, not taking his eyes from the corner. "I, I *think* there was some kind of round metal door, with a huge black *spider* on it."

"Um, a *spider*? How *big* a spider?" she asks, knowing Thian is *terrified* of spiders, thinking that, for *him*, *huge* might be the size of the tip of her *finger*.

"Maybe seven *feet* or so, and *that's* just its *body*. It was right in the *middle* of a round bronze, or brass *door* of some kind. The pathway ends, and the *only* thing there is that metal *door* with the big... *spider*."

"Seven... *feet*! By the *moons*, Thian, are you *sure*? Why isn't it coming *after* us then?"

"I *don't* know! Let's have a look and see what it's *doing*. But be *ready* okay?"

They both move slowly forward, wands at the ready. They reach the corner and hover. Thian nods and they both *whip* around the curve ready to shoot.

Their wand light, much *brighter* with the two of them illuminating the doorway, reveals what is *indeed* a huge black spider, *right* in the center of the large round metal door. But they can see that the spider is not *real*. It is a huge metal *sculpture* in exquisite detail. The eight legs of the spider extend to the sides of the doorway, *into* a round, polished marble border, embedded in the rough rock.

"Oh... *this* doesn't look good at all does it?" Tia asks now coming to hover beside Thian.

"No, it doesn't. That thing *scared* me half to death when I first saw it. I didn't wait around to see if it was *real* or not."

The two of them move cautiously forward, examining the hideous sculpture.

Thian maneuvers to take a better look at the legs of the spider. "Its legs extend into the rock. I think their kind of like, well, like *locking* bolts you see in the bank vaults."

“Thian, I *really* don’t like this at all. It really gives me the *creeps*. It’s like a *warning* or something.”

“Yeah, me too. But honestly, what *choice* do we have? We’ve *got* to see if it can be a way out of here. It might just be something to *scare* people away. Like those *other* doors we found, remember? It *sounded* like a huge monster was trying to crash *right* through the door, but when we opened it, there was *nothing* there. Just some *spell* that had been cast to make it look and *sound* like one is all.”

“Well, maybe. But there isn’t any *handle* or doorknob. How do we *open* it?”

“I’m not sure, but it could be that we just need to say... well *you* know, what *Amanda* taught us, like we did to all the other doors. Maybe it will open on its own then or something. Listen, I want you to go back to the corner and get ready to fly the heck *out* of here. When you’re ready, I’ll try to open the door and, uh, see what’s on the other side okay?”

“Okay, but Thian, be *really* careful, and stay mounted if you can okay?”

“Yeah, okay, let’s *do* this.”

Tia flies back to the corner, positioning herself where she can shoot off quickly back down the pathway, to *escape* if she needs to, but is also in a good position to fire any spells through the doorway, should Thian get it open and there *is* something waiting on the other side.

Tia nods to Thian, who nods back. Thian moves back a little from the huge door and *creepy* spider. Holding up his wand hand, which is visibly shaking, he clears his throat and says, “Orathian!”

One by one, the legs of the spider *snap* back away from the edge of the doorway, loudly *echoing* along the tunnel-like pathway. First a leg on one side snaps back, then one from the other. Both Thian and Tia’s eyes are wide and their hearts *racing*.

When the last leg snaps back, the spider *stands* up, scaring the *life* out of Thian, as it turns around one *complete* circle counterclockwise, then lays back down, resting against the door, feet pulled in *tightly* to its sides.

There is a *pop*, as the door swings forward a few inches, as Thian drifts back a little. Nothing seems to happen at all.

After a few heart pounding moments, Thian turns around to say something to Tia, who is hovering *right* against the pathway wall, where she has a great vantage point to fire through the doorway, should it open enough to shoot into, when a large *crack* appears from *nowhere* right behind her. Four *black* arms reach out from the darkness of the crack, and *snatch* Tia from her broom. Tia lets out a cry of surprise as she is *yanked* back, her broom dropping and *clattering* to the floor. Tia’s cry is quickly cut off, as she *disappears* into the inky darkness.

Before Thian can gather his wits, *another* arm reaches out, grabs Tia’s broom, and pulls it into the dark crack too. In a blink, the crack *snaps* shut, leaving no trace whatsoever.

“Noooo! Thian yells coming out of his frozen state. He shoots over to where the crack had been. “Tia! *Tia*! Let her *go*! Bring her *back*! Tia!”

Silence.

Thian dismounts and begins *pounding* on the rough rock wall, frantically looking for any *trace* of a hidden doorway.

“*Tiaaaaaaaaaa!*”

A crack appears *quickly*, just to the left of Thian’s left hand. A black hand reaches out and *grabs* Thian by the wrist, as the crack continues opening wider. Thian *yells* and instantly jumps into the air, while tilting backward into a ball. He *thrusts* his feet out against the wall, one foot on each side of the widening crack, and heaves with *all* his might. He feels the grasp of the Bogey

*slip* from his wrist, as he shoots back into the tunnel, landing *painfully* on his back, where he quickly scrambles to his feet, *grabs* his broom and mounts up.

*Scared* out of his mind, Thian kicks off, *cranks* the throttle and shoots back down the pathway as *quickly* as he can maneuver the curves. Soon, he sees a dim light ahead of him, and knows *Tianna* will be waiting there.

As Thian approaches, he screams, “*Go! Tianna! Go quick! Goooooooo!*”

Thian sees Tianna turn at an angle, and in a *flash*, she shoots up and out of sight.

Slowing quickly, Thian shoots through the open doorway, *swerves*, his momentum too great and hits the edge of the stairway *painfully*. Half dazed, he shoots up the stairs like a *mad* man.

As he flies through the opening of the petal, he yells, “*Close the petal, Sadie, quick!*”

“Where’s *Tia?*” Tianna cries, her face *drained* of color and eyes *wide* with fright staring at the gaping hole.

“*Bogey* got her!” Thian cries swerving to a stop beside Tianna, both with their wands at the ready.

“*No Sadie, wait!*” Tianna yells.

But it is too late. Tiny Sadie had jumped into the air, and is actually *hanging* from the handle, having put her *full* weight against it, the petal, already closing.

## The Pit

[To TOC](#)

Amanda, having remained on the floor and afraid to move, decides to get to her feet. Feeling around with her hands and sweeping her feet, she finds that she has tumbled down a *very* steep ramp into a *pit* of some kind, which seems to have sheer *vertical* walls. She stows her wand into its holster by instinct. Placing both hands against the rough rock walls, she begins moving as she sidesteps to her right.

Amanda is *sure* she can hear voices coming from someplace further to her right, but the sounds are very muffled. As she *stumbles* a few times sidestepping around the pit, each time thinking she may have tripped over some *creature* or kid's body, the voices become a little louder, and as Amanda looks to her right, she *thinks* she can see a very faint green light near the ground a little further away. Stopping, she turns toward the faint light, leaning forward, and *squints* into the darkness.

"There *is* light coming from over there," she whispers. "There must be a *door* or something."

Taking a few tentative steps at first, she can *clearly* hear muffled screams and cries coming from somewhere behind the light.

Terrified, Amanda approaches the faint light slowly, sliding her feet a little at a time, to be sure she will not fall down *another* embankment, or fall off a *ledge* to her death, should the sound and light be leading her into some kind of *trap*.

Soon, she can make out the outline of a doorway, set right into the rock face. She steps up to the door with her hands out in front of her, fingers touching against its roughly hewn wood.

Pressing her ear to the door, she listens intently, eyes moving from side to side as she *strains* to make out what kinds of voices and sounds she hears. After a few moments, and not being able to make anything out, she decides that she can either just *stand* there and do nothing, waiting for a *Bogey* to come take her away, or she can see if she can find a *handle* and take a peek inside, and perhaps, be a *little* more prepared for whatever may happen next.

Amanda feels around for a handle, when there is loud *clanking* from far overhead. Spinning around and looking up, Amanda hears a door open and someone *screaming* as they are tossed into the dark. There are *hideous* laughs which send a *shiver* shooting up Amanda's spine, making the hair on her *arms* stand on end.

Amanda stands *frozen* in place from fright, as she hears the door *slam* and the clanking of the locking bolts thumping into place. Something wooden *strikes* the cavern floor, making Amanda *gasp* and place a hand over her mouth, as the *screams* get closer. The cries of *terror* make Amanda shake so hard, it is all she can do to *stand* at all.

The screaming seems to be coming *right* at Amanda, who cringes as she turns her head to the side, expecting to be *struck* at any second by the falling body. Something loud *thuds* against the cavern floor a short distance away. Amanda places her back and *hands* against the doorway, her chest *heaving* and falling in frightened *staccato* breaths, eyes wide and straining to see who, or *what* was now in the pit with her, the light from the doorway behind her, having gone *out* when the door above had opened.

"No! *Please...* let me *out!*" comes a cry directly across from Amanda.

Amanda's eyes fly as *wide* as they can possibly go, her heart *jumping* to her throat, "*Tia? Is that you?*" she whispers hopefully.

There is a cry of *surprise* and fright from across the room, as something shuffles quickly away on the cavern floor. For a moment there is complete silence, then, “Uh... *Amanda?*” says a frantic, frightened, trembling voice.

“Oh my *God!* Tia! It *is* you! It’s me, *Amanda.*”

“*Amanda...*” Tia cries out in heaving sobs, “where *are* you? I can’t *see* anything, my wand won’t work.”

“They said wands *won’t* work in here, *mine* won’t work either. Are *you* alright?”

“No... I’m *really* scared! I hurt my *ankle* when they threw me down here. I hurt my *shoulder* too. Where *are* we anyway?”

“I don’t know. Some kid of... *pit.* Listen, I’ve found a *door* over here. Can you *walk* at all? Can you follow my voice?” Amanda asks squinting into the darkness.

There is a scuffling sound, then, “*Ouch...* that *really* hurts! Well, I’m on my *feet* anyway. I don’t think my ankle is *broken*, but it’s *defiantly* twisted.”

There are labored shuffling sounds, then, “Yeah, I can walk a *little.* It really *hurts*, but I can manage. Keep talking Amanda and I’ll try to *find* you okay?”

“Yeah, okay. I’m over here. Did you meet Atrum Umbra? The *King* of the Bogey?”

“No, they just *grabbed* me when Thian and I were exploring what we found in the *second* petal of the Pentagram. And then... oh, *wait*, I think I can see some kind of *green* light.”

“Yeah,” Amanda says a little calmer now, “the *light’s* back on. That’s the *door* I’m standing at. Your voice is right in front of... *ouch!*”

“Sorry,” Tia says having poked Amanda in the face. The two then hug tightly as Tia continues, “Oh Amanda, I’m so *glad* you’re okay... you *are*, aren’t you?”

They step slightly apart, still holding hands, “Yeah, I’m okay. *Scared* out of my mind and a little *banged* up again, but, *yeah*, I’m okay. What happened? You said you were with *Thian...* where *is* he? Is he okay? What about *Tianna* and *Sadie?*”

The two sit on the cavern floor with their backs against the door. Tia tells Amanda everything that has happened since Amanda had disappeared into the darkness of the doorway.

Amanda then tells Tia what happened to her - about meeting Atrum Umbra, and what the Bogey had said to her just before dropping and *kicking* her into the pit.

“Wait!” Tia says in a very frightened tone, “One of them said that the *King* might even, uh, *present* you... all *dressed* up for dinner?”

“Yeah, so?” Amanda asks confused. “Maybe he just wants to *talk* or something you know. Like find out where we’re *from*, what we’re *doing* here and stuff over dinner.”

“Oh Amanda, this *isn’t* good. Sadie told us what she had read in class about the Bogey, and, about them *eating* kids and stuff...”

“What?!” Amanda cries as she squeezes Tia’s hand a little too tightly, causing Tia to cry out.

“Oh, *sorry.* But, what do you *mean* they eat kids? I thought they were just *Shadow People*, and made you their *slaves* or something.”

“Yeah, well, *Sadie* told us that *sometimes* one of the kids are *dressed* up and *presented* for dinner. But not as in *dressing* some kid up to look *nice* and presenting them at dinner as a *guest*, to *share* in the dinner... but dressing them up, like with *spices*, or like *salad* dressing or, well, like dressing up a *Cucuteo* with stuffing and things... then presenting them *for* dinner... *as* the dinner.”

“Oh God! Oh *God!* We’ve *got* to get out of here Tia, but *how?*”

“I don’t *know!* My *wand* won’t work, I’ve tried that. Hey, *wait*, they threw my *broom* in here with me too. They said I could use it for sweeping out the *caverns* since I couldn’t *ride* it

anymore. Maybe I can't *ride* it, but maybe I can *hit* one of them with it if they come after us, then we can try to get away. I mean, they feel *solid* enough in here, in their own *domain*. Help me find it okay?"

Amanda gets up and helps Tia to her feet. They begin sweeping the cavern floor with their feet in the direction Amanda heard something wooden strike earlier. Amanda soon kicks Tia's broom, picks it up and hands it to her.

"Well, maybe I can't ride it, but I can use it for *now* to help me walk for a while. Hey, did they try to take your *necklace*? Or the *Specteroscope*?"

"No. I guess they don't *care* about stuff like that. They told me I could *keep* my wand, and I tried to use it a couple times, but, it won't *work* in here."

"So, what do we do now?" Tia asks with a shaky voice.

"Well, I was just going to see if I could find some way in through that door, when *you* showed up. I mean, we *could* just stay here and wait for something to *happen* to us, or..."

"We can see if we can make something happen to *them* first," Tia answers. "Yeah, *okay*, I'm with you. I really don't *like* the idea of just standing here in the *dark*, knowing that's where they *expect* to find us. What's that *noise*? Sounds like... *screaming* and, and muffled voices."

"Yeah, that's coming from the other side of the door. It's really *weird*. It starts, then *stops* for a while, then starts and stops again. I can't figure it out. Are you *sure* you want to see what's on the other side?"

Tia chews on her lower lip for a moment, then says, "No, not *really*. But I don't want to just stand *here* and wait either. So, I guess we should give it a try."

They make their way back to the wooden door, both pressing their ears against it. The screaming and loud voices have stopped, but other sounds are now faintly coming through.

"What *is* that?" Tia asks. "Sounds kind of like..."

"*Digging*?" Amanda asks in a whisper. "It sounds like *picks* or... or *hammers* or something doesn't it?"

"Yeah it does. *Hey*... I think I found the *door* latch! Yeah, Amanda, I've *found* it!"

"Well, give it a try, and let's see if we can open it *just* a little okay? But *only* a little."

Tia places her hand on the latch and presses down. To their surprise, and *horror*, there is a loud, distinct *clank* which echoes around the deep pit, as the door pops toward them about a quarter of an inch.

Both of them freeze in place, eyes wide with hearts *pounding*, Tia's hand still tightly grasping the latch.

## The Deep

[To TOC](#)

Everything falls quiet. The only sounds they hear are their own frightened breathing, and the beating of their hearts in their ears. No cries... no screams... no sound of digging... just *silence*.

“What should we do?” says Tia in a low whisper, making Amanda jump.

“I don’t know. I can’t *hear* anything at all now. Let’s just wait a minute okay?”

After a short pause, the sounds of digging begin again, and from time to time, sounds like someone crying out in *pain*. Tia slowly lets go of the latch, trying not to make any noise at all.

“Okay, see if you can open the door *just* a little,” Amanda whispers.

There is a faint *squeaking* sound as Tia pulls the door toward them, the dim green light starting to flood through the widening crack of the doorway.

“*Stop*. See if you can *see* anything through the crack Tia.”

Tia moves her head to look around the corner of the door, and as she peers in she gasps, placing her other hand over her mouth.

“*What?* What can you see?” Amanda whispers excitedly.

“It’s all a dim *green* inside. It’s some kind of huge cavern. I don’t *see* anybody, but the voices and *digging* sounds are coming from someplace over a low *hill* I see...at least, I *think* they are. *Here*, see for yourself.”

Tia steps to the side and lets Amanda peek in. “Yeah, I think you’re *right*. After all this dark, that light seems pretty *bright* actually, even though it’s still really hard to see much. I think the sounds are coming from over that little hill *too*. Let’s *sneak* in and take a closer look okay?”

“Yeah, I *guess* so. At least we can *see* in there anyway. But we need to be *really* quiet. This door *squeaks* a lot. I hope the Bogey don’t *hear* us!”

Amanda slowly pulls the door wider, as it continues to *creak*, sending goose bumps up and down their bodies.

“Can you squeeze *through* now Amanda? It looks *wide* enough... maybe.”

“I’ll try,” Amanda turns sideways and shimmies halfway through the doorway. “I don’t *see* anybody. I can get through okay too. Come on, let’s get *in* and see if we can find out what’s going on.

“It’s like being in *Oz*,” Amanda whispers as she steps all the way through and to one side.

“Like being... *where?*” Tia asks.

“Oh, it’s a *story* back on earth, about the *emerald* city in a book called *The Wizard of Oz*. The characters go into a city that’s *all* green and... well, never mind.”

As Tia steps through the doorway, Amanda points to a tall and wide stalagmite saying, “Let’s get to *that*, then to that next really *big* one near the hill okay?”

Tia nods, and leaning on her broom for support, the two of them make their way as fast as they can to the *thick* stalagmite a short distance away. They hesitate there for a few moments, looking around *nervously* and listening intently for any sounds close by. Amanda points to the next stalagmite near the hill. Tia nods and they both make their way to it.

Placing their backs against the cool stalagmite, Amanda whispers, “Stay here. I’m going to crawl up that hill and see what’s on the other side. If everything’s okay, I’ll *wave* for you to come okay?”

“Okay, but *be* careful.”

Amanda sprints to the bottom of the low hill, crouching *low* as she reaches its base. She quickly looks around. Not seeing anyone, she begins *crawling* up the hill on her hands and knees.

Once near the top, she lays flat and pulls herself to the very top. Looking around quickly, she ducks back down, turns and waves to Tia to join her.

Tia looks around nervously, then moving as quickly as she can, using her broom as a kind of *crutch*, she hobbles to the base of the hill. Panting and *swallowing* hard, she begins to crawl to the top. As she nears Amanda, Amanda puts a finger to her lips, indicating Tia should not speak or whisper.

Crawling as quietly as she can, Tia reaches the top and stops beside Amanda. Amanda, using *two* fingers from one hand, holds them in front of her eyes, then points to the top of the hill. Tia nods and slowly crawls to the peak, then lifts her head until *just* the top of her head, to her eyes have cleared the top. Amanda crawls beside her, and she too is now looking over the top of the low hill.

The sight before them fills them with *terror*. There must be *three* dozen kids ranging from four years of age to *teenagers*, all digging or *moving* dirt and rock away in small carts. The sight that makes them feel *faint* though, are the huge *black* forms moving around the kids. Most look like a misshapen person, but others are in the shapes of huge *animals*, some, have *no* distinct form at all, but are like *ever-changing* black blobs.

One of the forms, in a shape like a person, is holding a large *black* whip, and *snaps* it at a small girl who must be around *seven* years of age. The whip *strikes* her on the back and she *screams* from the pain as the force sends her sprawling *face* first onto the rough cavern floor.

Many of the other kids start to scream and cry, as the one with the *whip* snaps it at the others for *no* reason at all. Some of the kids begin to *run* away, but the other black forms block them, sending them running and *screaming* in another direction. The entire time, the hideous black forms are making *blood-curdling* deep laughs and *cackling* sounds.

Both Amanda and Tia duck back behind the hill, shaken to the core.

"Amanda, I'm *really* scared! What should we do?"

"Doooo?" says a deep voice right beside them, making them *both* scream and look around frantically.

"Who *said* that?" Amanda whispers.

"Why, *I* did," says a rumbling voice.

"Look!" Tia says loudly, making Amanda jump.

Amanda looks to where Tia is pointing at her *own* shadow, cast by the dim green light within the cavern. The shadow is *changing* shape from *her* form, to one growing longer and *darker*. In a moment, it seems to *thicken*, then rises into the cavern, *not* as a shadow, but as a *solid* three dimensional form.

It continues to rise higher until it is *eight* feet tall then changes form again, from a formless *blob* into *something* resembling a person's form, but very thick and *powerful* looking. It has *huge* broad shoulders and an oddly shaped head, with *dark* eyes that are rimmed with the *slightest* of gray, *just* enough to make out that they *are* eyes in an otherwise shapeless head.

After a moment of the thing just looking at them, something resembling a misshapen *mouth* opens and a hideous laugh *reverberates* throughout the cavern around them.

"Why, you will come with *me* of course, like *all* the others before you. You are just as *stupid* as all the rest. Do you not *know* where you are? You are in the *domain* of the Bogey!"

“We, the *Shadow People*, are known to be wherever *light* may *cast* shadow. Did you not notice us all around you? *Come* boys, let’s give our new *guests* a welcome they’ll *never* forget!”

To Amanda and Tia’s horror, Amanda’s shadow begins to grow in size and *rise* into the air as it takes form. Amanda scoots away from it, *frightened* out of her mind.

All around them, *shadows* from rocks, boulders, and the *stalagmites* they had hidden behind, begin to *shift* and change form, becoming *Bogey* of various sizes - some only as *tall* as a pebble, scampering here and there like black *beetles*, while others *tower* more than fifty feet, appearing from the *shadows* of the stalagmites.

The Bogey who had been their *own* shadows, reach down and grab Amanda and Tia.

Tia, still holding her broom, begins *swinging* it at the Bogey who has hold of her. The broom strikes the Bogey *square* in the mouth. It lets out a *cry* of surprise, tossing Tia *up* and over the top of the hill, where she vanishes from Amanda’s sight.

“*Leave* her alone!” Amanda screams as she struggles in the grip of the huge Bogey holding her.

“We’ll teach *you* to obey child!” the Bogey says as he tosses Amanda over the hill and laughs. Amanda screams and *thrashes* in the air as she flies over the hill.

Amanda lands *hard* next to Tia, who has scrambled to her feet and is now holding her broom to the side, like a *batter* waiting for a fast ball.

A black mass like a *thick* shadow moves over the hill and disappears into a crack in the cavern floor. Amanda and Tia look at the crack, completely *terrified*, and then begin looking around for the other Bogey.

“Where did they *go*?” Tia asks frantically looking around, then back to the crack. “And how did that *huge* Bogey get into that *little* crack?”

“Like *this*!” a deep growling voice thunders from behind them.

The girls spin around, but cannot see *anything*. All the other kids with *terror*-filled faces, have stopped to watch the new comers. The Bogey in the distance watching the other kids, begin to laugh their *hideous* laughs.

“Who *said* that?” Tia asks shaking from head to toe.

“Where *is* it?” Amanda cries turning in a complete circle.

“Right *here*,” says the voice.

Amanda spins in time to look at the cavern floor, where a shadow *pours* up out of the crack and *spreads* out on the cavern floor, like *spilled* ink.

Tia takes the pointed end of her broom and begins *stabbing* at the black mass, as it changes form and *dodges* her attack, leaving bare cavern wherever she strikes.

There are frightening *howls* from all around them, as more and more *dark* figures appear and change into the form of the Bogey people.

A voice *booms* from behind them. The girls spin around to see a *huge* Bogey standing a few feet away, holding a large *black* whip. Before either can cry out, the Bogey *snaps* the whip. The end of it *quickly* wraps around Amanda’s ankles. The huge Bogey *yanks* back on the whip, as Amanda flips into the air, landing *painfully* on her back, knocking half the wind out of her, as the back of her head strikes the ground with a *crack*.

“*Stop* it! *Leave* her alone!” Tia yells.

The huge, *ugly* Bogey yanks his whip again, dislodging it from Amanda. He whips it behind him then *lashes* out at Tia. Tia does a kind of quick *pole* vault at the same time, using her broom. She flies forward, and strikes the Bogey *square* in the throat with her uninjured foot. The Bogey

gags, *staggers* backward, and *drops* his whip. There are *gasps* from all the other kids standing *frozen* in place several yards away, as well as from the surrounding Bogey.

Tia falls hard to the cavern floor after striking the Bogey, and grabbing her broom, she *rolls* over to come up beside Amanda, who *still* looks dazed.

The Bogey that was struck by Tia howls in a *terrifying* roar – a roar so *horrendous* that it is indescribably *blood-freezing*.

The Bogey picks up his whip and begins *whipping* Tia over and over, each time sending her body *bouncing* off the cavern floor. She *screams* again and again as the sound of the whip *booms* around the cavern.

Amanda's vision begins to dim, but she *shakes* her head to try to clear it. She begins to focus, *just* as Tia's screams stop. Amanda sees that Tia is *still* being whipped, her body *bouncing* with each strike, but Tia has *passed* out, and is now *bleeding* from gashes all over her.

"Stop!" booms another larger Bogey stepping in front of the one whipping Tia. "I think we know *which* of these brats we'll be having for *supper*. Take them *all* to their chambers! We'll prep *these* two for Atrum Umbra's dinner later, and take a few of the *others* for ourselves. *Take* them away!"

Amanda's head is still spinning, as she watches Tia's limp body hoisted high in the air by a *towering* Bogey, then she herself is *roughly* grabbed and lifted into the air. She watches through half-closed eyes all the other kids being *herded* into a side tunnel. Amanda can take no more, and *passes* out.

Sometime later, Amanda feels herself being shaken *gently* awake. She opens her eyes to see the frightened face of a girl, about thirteen or fourteen, blinking at her. It takes Amanda a few seconds to remember where she is, before sitting *straight* up shouting, "*Tia?! Where is she?*"

"She's *okay*. She's looking around the chamber for a way out, but there *aren't* any, we've all looked *hundreds* of times."

"But, but she was *really* hurt... I saw that thing *whipping* her and all the gashes *bleeding*. How, how..."

"The whip the Bogey use, gives you self-*healing* wounds. Even your *slashed* and ripped clothing somehow *repairs* itself almost right away," the girl says helping Amanda to her feet.

"The Bogey want to *scare* us, and *hurt* us, but want to keep *most* of us alive to do their digging and other chores. They use the *whip* a lot, and it really *hurts*, but some kind of Wizitch makes the wounds heal within a few *minutes*, so at least you don't *bleed* to death. It doesn't leave any *scars* either. We've *all* been whipped before. They do it because it's *fun* for them, and it scares us because we never know *which* of us they'll come after next."

"Who *are* you?" Amanda asks rubbing the back of her head, looking around the large cavern. She sees some *forty* plus kids, ranging from four years of age to some in their late teens.

"My name is *Careabee*. I'm from Ioteen. I was taken when I was five. I got out of bed to go potty, and when I put my *feet* down, I was *grabbed* by the ankles and *yanked* under the bed. I'm not sure how, but I ended up in the *dark* and was taken here.

"I *think* I'm thirteen, but there are no timepieces here, and no *day* or night. So, *none* of us *really* know how old we are now. Some of the kids have only been here a few days perhaps, others *years*, some, all their liv..."

"*Amanda!*" Tia's voice sounds from somewhere behind her.

"*Tia!*" Amanda yells spinning around. She spots Tia running to her from the far side of the cavern, not a *gash* on her. Amanda runs and meets Tia near the middle of the cavern as Careabee jogs along behind, smiling as she watches the two embrace.

“Are you *alright*?” Amanda asks stepping back a little to look Tia over.

“Yeah, well *now* anyway. I actually thought I was gonna *die* when it was *whipping* me though. I’ve never *felt* pain like that before.”

A boy about fifteen walks to stand beside Tia. Tia looks at him saying, “Amanda, this is Danahbu. He’s been showing me around the cavern.”

“Hi,” Amanda says shaking his hand. “How long have you been, uh, *down* here?”

“I’ve been in the Deep, *all* my life, as far as I can remember. I have *some* memory of my mom and dad, and a sister *too* I think. But, just bits and pieces of *images* really. I’m not even sure what I remember is *real* or not.

“How are you feeling Amanda? Careabee’s been watching over you since they brought you in here with us.”

“I’m okay I guess. Is there a way *out* of here?”

“Not that *I* could find,” Tia says shaking her head as she looks around the cavern. “All those tunnels around this cavern, just lead to *other* smaller caverns where the kids can go to rest. None of those smaller ones have any other doors or tunnels. Danahbu says they’ve been looking for other ways out, when the Bogey take them to other areas to dig, but they are always *watched* closely and no one’s ever seen any way out.”

“Amanda,” Danahbu says looking very nervous, “the Bogey said they would be *back* for you and Tia, to, well, *present* to Atrum Umbra for dinner. Do you *know* what that means?”

“Yeah, I do *now*,” Amanda says looking at Tia, who looks just as pale as she feels. “I can’t *believe* they eat kids. I thought they were just *shadows* who could take the form of, well *anything* at all, but, I didn’t know they actually needed to *eat*.”

“Yeah, they *do*,” Careabee says looking at Danahbu. “And we’ve seen *lots* of kids come and go over the years. New kids show up *every* day, to replace the ones they *eat*, and they eat a *lot* of us. They tend to like the taste of the *younger* kids, so, I think that’s why *we’re* still alive.

“We can *try* to hide you, but, well, we’ve *tried* it before, and the Bogey just think it’s some kind of *game*. They *always* find you. There *is* no escape. I’m really sorry. Danahbu and I’ve been trying to find a way out and take the others with us for *years* now. We haven’t given up, but, I’m afraid I don’t know *how* or where to hide the two of you.”

“And the thing is,” Danahbu says sadly. “Even when we *have* tried to hide kids before, the Bogey will just take some *other* kids in their place, and eat *them* instead. But they *will* find you eventually, and then, they, uh, like to *play* with their food for a while first, before *killing* you in front of all of the other kids, then *hauling* you away for their supper.”

A huge door at one end of the cavern *thunders* open, and all the kids begin lining up around the huge cavern. Many *other* kids pour out from the other tunnels to make lines in front of those already lined up against the walls.

“What’s *happening*?” Tia asks, now shaking hard.

“They’re *coming* for their... *dinner*,” Danahbu says nervously as he backs up. “I’m sorry, we *have* to line up or become *supper* ourselves. I’m sorry, we have no *choice*.”

Danahbu grabs Careabee by the arm and pulls her after him as she cries, “Amanda, Tia, I’m *sorry*, I’m so *sorry*...”

Tia cries after them, “It’s not your *fault*. It’s okay,” then a little softer, “it’s okay.”

“Not *really*,” Amanda says as she turns to see what is now coming through the huge doorway.

*Dozens* of various sized Bogey flood into the cavern and *fan* out, followed by a huge Bogey that towers *twelve* feet. Amanda *knows* this is Atrum Umbra, the *King* of the Bogey.

A slight *shock* from Amanda's necklace sends an electric *jolt* through her body, making her quiver for a moment.

Tia takes Amanda's hand and feels Amanda shaking. Tia looks at Amanda's hair and notices that it's *waving* slightly, but there is *no* movement of the air in the *stifling* caverns, deep within the ground under some mountain. Tia has seen Amanda's hair do this several times before, and lets go of Amanda's hand as she takes a small step to the side.

"Which is the *brat* that kicked you in the *throat* Ugo?" Atrum Umbra bellows, looking at the two newcomers, Amanda and Tia.

"That one," Ugo says pointing the end of his massive black whip at Tia. "*She's* the one who *dared* strike a Bogey. You should kill her *first* and make her friend *watch*, knowing she can do *nothing* to save her!"

Amanda's hair begins to wave more wildly, her body beginning to shake more violently.

"Yes, the two of them look rather *tasty* actually," Atrum Umbra says licking his huge *ugly* lips with a very long, black tongue. "But I think Ugo, *you* should have the pleasure of killing *that* one," he says pointing a huge finger at Tia. "*I'll* take care of the other, once *you* finish with *her*."

Ugo has what can only be a look of pleasure on his *hideous* face, as he steps forward unfurling his massive whip.

"No!" Tia yells. "How can you *eat* us? You're... you're only *Shadow People*, made of the *dark* and shadows. Why do you need to eat at *all*?"

"Near the beginning of *time* itself," Atrum Umbra says stepping forward and halting Ugo from striking, "a *very* powerful witch brought *life* to the darkness of this realm. She used the most *powerful* Wizitch ever known, and gave us *life*, provided we *serve* her whenever she called.

"She gave us the *power* to become a solid *living* being, *here* within the Deep, which is *our* domain. *All* living things must eat, and so must *we* while in this form, here in the Deep. As shadows, we travel in *many* forms wherever light may *cast* us. But we return to the *Deep* with the children we capture, as *our* slaves, to dwell here with us until their *death*. Be it natural... or otherwise, *right* boys?"

The other Bogey howl with laughter.

"For time unknown," Atrum Umbra continues, slowly walking around Tia and Amanda, "the Bogey and the *witch* worked together. We would do whatever *evil* she bid us do, and in return, *we* were given life, and allowed to take as *many* children and do what we *pleased* with them. And we take *thousands* each day, from *all* across the realms.

"But ages ago, the witch *stopped* coming. We have not *heard* from her since, and believe she is *long* dead, and we have taken *more* and more children, and now, even *adults* from time to time if we please, which she *forbade* us to do. *She* is no longer here, to tell us what *we*, the Bogey *can* and cannot do. We... are our *own* masters now.

"But enough! I am *hungry*, and it is time for you to watch your friend here *die*... before *I*, kill and eat *you*!"

The King turns to the other children lined up against the cavern walls and shouts, "*Many* of you here are *new* comers as well. Let what you see now stay *fresh* in your minds, for those that do *not* obey our every command, shall have the *same* end come to them. In fact," the King says turning to look at Amanda, whose hair is now waving as in a mild wind, "to show you what we will do to *anyone* who disobeys, I shall eat *this* one, *veeeery* slowly, while she is *still* alive. Ugo, kill the other, *now*!"

Ugo grins a *hideous* crooked smile, and begins drawing his whip back over his massive shoulder.

“No! *Please...* don’t!” Tia cries, tears *streaming* down her face as she begins backing away.

Amanda’s hair now shoots *straight* out behind her, and then up at a slight angle. The movement catches the attention of the King and Ugo, and they turn to look at one another for a brief moment in bewilderment.

“You will *not* harm her Tuladan!” Amanda says as she pulls her wand from her holster. “You will do as *I* say... or *perish!*”

The King takes a few steps back as the other Bogeys gasp.

“How do you, a mere *child*, know of my *true* name? I have not gone by *that* name for eons past. And how *dare* you talk to *me* that way! *I* am the *King* of the Bogey! This is *my* domain, and *I*, and *I* alone, *rule* here!”

As Tia steps further to the side, she sees that besides from Amanda’s hair *snapping* in an unseen wind, Amanda looks *very* relaxed, smiling a very *strange* smile - one Tia cannot begin to describe. Amanda begins to tap her wand against her other open palm.

“No Tuladan, it is not *you* who rule here, but *I*, as I *always* have,” Amanda says looking around the cavern as though she has just noticed it.

Looking at the frightened children lined up against the walls, Amanda points her wand to one rather *scraggly* girl, whose skirt is *far* too small for her. With a quick *swish* of her wand, and without a word, a yellow bolt *shoots* through the green din of the cavern, *striking* the girl. Her skirt *instantly* adjusts and fits her *perfectly*.

Gasps and *cries* of surprise come from everyone... *including* the Bogey.

“How did you *do* that?” the King demands with huge eyes growing wide. “Wands have *no* power here. *You...* have *no* power against us!”

“You always were the *foolish* one Tuladan,” Amanda says in a voice that is not her own. “But as you can *see*, *this* wand works perfectly well here in the Deep. And as for my *not* having any power here, it was *I* who *gave* you life in the *first* place. Do you remember this...?”

Amanda reaches up and pulls her necklace out from under her tattered robe, where it falls *gleaming* onto her chest.

For a moment, Tuladan just stares at the necklace with a blank expression.

Amanda then points to the *center* stone within the necklace.

Another moment passes, then his eyes fly *wide* as he steps back quickly saying, “No! It cannot *be*! It has been *lost* for unknown ages! It *cannot* be.”

Tia has walked over to stand beside Danahbu and Careabee, who are shaking just as *hard* as Tia is.

“*What’s* going on?” Careabee whispers to Tia.

“I’m not sure, but be ready to *duck*. I’ve never seen *that* look on Amanda’s face before, but I’ve seen the hair, and that means something really *horrible* is about to happen.”

“What do you *mean*...?” Danahbu asks, but is cut off when Amanda begins speaking in that strange *cackling* voice - a mix of her *own* voice, along with another.

“Do you remember what the necklace is *called* Tuladan?” Amanda asks as she casually begins walking around the large cavern, taking in the sights before her, breathing *deeply*, as though she has never *breathed* before.

Reaching with one hand, she *pinches* her other arm, a smile widening on her face as she says to herself, “*Solid*. Once again *flesh* and bone. And to *breathe* the air once again. Yes... it’s *nice* to be back and out of that *infernal* gem.”

Tuladan stands there for a few seconds looking to the other Bogey, who look confused, some even *frightened*.

Amanda then spins and shoots a *violet* bolt from her wand shouting, “I *asked* you a *question* Tuladan!”

The bolt strikes Tuladan in the left shoulder. He *howls* in pain, staggering back in *shock* and surprise. The other Bogey gasp and begin to fan out, moving back.

The kids lined against the cavern have gasped as well, becoming even *more* frightened. No one has *ever* used a wand in the Deep before, and no one but *Tia* has ever *hurt* a Bogey before - that they knew of. And yet, they have just *witnessed* it with their own eyes. A wand *can* work here in the Deep!

“I’ll ask you *again* Tuladan,” Amanda snarls. “Do you remember what this *necklace* is called?”

“It, I, it *can’t* be though,” Tuladan stammers rubbing his shoulder and staring at the necklace.

Amanda raises her wand to strike again when Tuladan yells, “*Whiro!* The dark witch who wore it, called it *Whiro* when in this plane. She said that the *first* great evil she had *captured* was a beast named *Whiro*.”

“But that gem... it *cannot* be the same one, and *you* cannot *possibly* be her! It was *ages* ago and she would be long *dead* now, even as *powerful* as she was! The necklace of Whiro, which held but a *single* gem, must have been destroyed *ages* ago too!”

“And yet Tuladan, *here* is the necklace,” Amanda says looking down and stroking the necklace like a *long* lost friend. “And, although *surprised* but most delighted... here am *I* once again - in solid *flesh* and bone, *living* through *this* *Wielder*.”

“But *how?* How is that *possible?*” Tuladan asks suspiciously, not sure *what* to think. “That *cannot* be the necklace of Whiro, I do *not* believe it!”

“Do you remember the *tale* of the necklace Tuladan? *Who* I had help me, after my family had created the *first* necklace, with the single gem? Do you remember *what* the other stones were to represent, once I had completed them? You *used* to recite it, since it was from the *death* of Whiro that the first great power of the necklace was *captured*, and placed into the *first* jewel, forever to do what *I*, or the *Wielder* of the necklace, bid do. *Tell* me the tale Tuladan, you *do* remember, don’t you?”

After standing silent for a moment, Tuladan begins to speak, eyes unfocused as though recalling something from ages past.

“The Necklace of *Whiro* is also known as the *Necklace of Death*,” Tuladan says in his deep rumbling voice.

“Whiro was the *Lizard*-man God of Death, who lived in the *underworld* and put evil thoughts into the mind of all creatures.

“The *Wielder* of the necklace became known as the *Wielder of Power*. It is said that morally, the *Wielder of Power* appears to *cause* the evil events which take place. Physically, it is those who *submit* to the power wielded.

“The telling of Whiro is thus:

There is told of a time old and lost  
Where none had ever dared to cross  
In the blackest of black and deepest of deep  
Lies one who creeps and does not sleep  
In the depths of his tomb he plans and he schemes  
As the millennia pass in his violent dreams  
New whispers arise and shadows are formed

As his anger grows and injustices stormed  
Whiro arises from his bed of flames  
Determined that all his power proclaim  
His halls are of paths that none can tread  
His stature and form is the father of dread  
He is monstrous in form and color of black  
He lives with his darkness and for the attack  
With eyes of green and voice of red  
He slowly unfurls his mighty wingspread  
The Dark Ones bid him to help them succeed  
As they forge the Necklace his powers they need  
Green gems for his eyes, blood red for his voice  
The Wearer falls in their power and has no choice  
The Necklace of Whiro - the Necklace of Death  
The Wielder will use them till their dying breath  
And through this Wielder, no mercy will come  
As the Dark Ones arise showing mercy to none  
Many will deem that the Necklace not exist  
That the Dark Ones are naught but legend, they insist  
But the One who wears the Necklace will truth know  
As the power seeps inward and all becomes woe  
They are the Necklace and the Necklace is them  
Once they choose to wear it they are condemned  
For to use the powers which are trapped deep within  
Will take over the wearer, who becomes one of them.”

“Very *good* Tuladan,” Amanda says nodding and grinning a hideous smile. “You see, even after *all* this time, you *remember* what I told you. Do you remember what I told you *happened* to the Lizard Man of the Deep?”

Tuladan is clearly shaken now, and looks around quickly as though looking for a way to escape.

“Well... *do* you?” Amanda asks again with an angry snarl.

“Yes... yes. You... *she*, said that after Whiro helped to *forge* the original necklace, from the metals of the *Deep*, that you... *she*... had somehow *killed* Whiro, and forever *trapped* him in that center stone of the necklace. *Forever* making him your... *her*... slave. That he and his great *evil* were the first powers *wielded* by the wearer, of the yet unfinished necklace. And, and that *whenever* the wearer killed another, *their* spirit was *sucked* into one of the stones and *trapped* there for all eternity, to do whatever the *wearer* bid. That the necklace would become *stronger* and stronger over time, and other *jewels* would be added, until no one, and *nothing* could stop you... *her*... I mean, the wearer, the *Wielder*. You, I mean *she*, said that it was through that power of the *first* jewel, and the many other spirits *trapped* in the gem, that *we* were given life, and could dwell here in the Deep forever, where *Whiro* once dwelt.”

“Yes, very good Tuladan,” Amanda says, walking to stand in front of Tia for a moment, looking into Tia’s frightened face. Amanda then turns back to Tuladan asking, “You were given *life* to dwell in the Deep forever, and given the power to take as *many* children as you like, as long as you did... *what* Tuladan?”

“Uh, I don’t know what you mean,” Tuladan says nervously.

“But of *course* you do Tuladan. You were given *life* and the power to frighten, snatch, *torture*, enslave and *devour* as many children as you wish, as long as... you serve *me* whenever *I* ask. Do you remember *now* Tuladan?”

Tuladan’s huge eyes go as wide as a boulder, as he stammers, “But, you, you *cannot* be her! She would have *died* eons ago, and the necklace was *never* finished, and is said to have been *lost* now for ages. How can this *be*?”

“Well, it seems that when *I* and the members of my family *formulated* the spells, and crafted the *original* gem, that we made a rather *stupid* mistake. As you recall, I set a spell on the unfinished necklace, that would *protect* the wearer from *death*, by *any* means necessary, *unless* they died from *natural* causes, and *that*... only because I could not figure a way *around* it...at least... at *that* time.

“In the beginning, I had cast a spell which would *capture* the soul of anyone *I* or members of my family, *killed* - usually pathetic *villagers* at first, then tens of *thousands* of the Light.

“But, I decided much later, that only the *foulest*, and most *evil* of the Dark, who would not bow *down* before me, should be absorbed into the gems. For the power of the Dark, is *far* more powerful than that of the *Light*.

“I also cast a *very* powerful spell, to only allow the most *evil* and *powerful* to be able to pick *up* the necklace, and put it on, once the *death* of the previous Wielder occurred. *I* began the necklace, but it was my *daughter* who completed the necklace you see before you, *long* after giving *you* life that is.

“But, for *some* reason, which I do not *yet* understand, this simple *child*, whose *body* I am now animating, managed to *find* the necklace, *fool* the Watcher into thinking she is *evil*, and *allowed* her to pick it up and put it on!

“Once on, it *cannot* be taken off until the Wielder *dies*, or they... well, *never* mind. This *child* truly does not have an *evil* bone in her body, so *how* she was able to be accepted, and put the *Necklace of Power* on, I will have to look into, as my *powers* return and I *eventually* take her over for *good* - to be *young* and *powerful* once again.

“And once I find the *Great Book of Power*, hidden by one of my bloodline, *nothing* can stop me from destroying the *Light* forever! And, I will *never* die, and *forever* be young!

“The thing is though, *ages* ago, I made a *mistake*. Young and *foolish* I was back then. You see, since the necklace *captures* the spirit of one who dies in its *presence*, that seems to have included the *Wielder*, which neither *I* nor any of us who created the *first* necklace had *thought* of. *Stupid* oversight really, but then again... *here* I am. It may *yet* prove to have been a very *fortunate* mistake. I have been *trapped* in that *infernal* necklace for *eons*!

“I, as you recall, was the *original* Wielder. There have been others. But now, for *some* reason, *I* have managed to take *control* over of this... *child*, for the time anyway, and am able to use *her* body to do what *I* wish, although she is *fighting* me every inch of the way. She is *incredibly* strong, and I don’t know *why*, unless... it almost seems as though she’s...

“Well, *no* matter, for at the moment, I *am* back, and I now ask that *you* and the Bogey once again serve *me* Tuladan. You will now do as I, *Eris*, *command* of you, or *perish*.”

“No!” Tuladan yells stepping forward a little. “*I* rule the Deep now, and we do as *we* please! You are *not* the great witch *Eris*, you are just a *child*. This is but a *trick* of some kind! You may have *some* power here, to stop a *few* of us, but you *don’t* have the power to stop *all* of us! Ugo, *get* her!”

Ugo raises his whip back over his shoulder and begins to *lash* out, when Amanda points her wand saying, “Interluminosmaxima!”

There is an almost *pure* blinding white bolt that shoots from Amanda’s wand, striking Ugo *square* in the chest.

He *screams* as he drops his whip, clutching first at his chest, then his *enormous* head. A *burst* of bright light fans out from his eyes as he screams in *sheer* terror, the other Bogey *scrambling* away from him, screaming and *dashing* into the corners, some disappearing into *cracks* within the cavern floor or walls.

Ugo begins to break apart, with *streams* of brilliant light *exploding* from all parts of him, until he has been *eaten* away from the inside out, like an *acid* devouring him. The light *vanishes* and not a *trace* of Ugo is left.

“Pity,” Amanda says calmly now pointing her wand at Tuladan. “*Last* chance Tuladan. You *will* serve once again as... *my* slave, or you and *all* the Bogey on this realm, will be *destroyed*. Your choice.”

Tuladan scrunches up his *ugly* face and angrily shouts, “No! We serve *no* one! There are too *many* of us for you to take before *we* get you. And when I *do*, I’m going to *rip* your arms and legs off while you’re *still* alive, and make you *watch* as I *eat* you piece by *piece*! *Get* her!”

The dozens and *dozens* of Bogey still there charge Amanda. She does several *back* flips and lands beside the very startled and *frightened* Tia. Amanda twirls her wand, pointing it at the nearest Bogey and yells, “Interluminosmaximatotalasreflectousdisolvous!”

There is a *tremendous*, pure white bolt from Amanda’s wand, which hits a *huge* Bogey to Amanda’s left. Amanda, *quick* as a cat, whips her wand in all directions, the white bolt moving first *into* and out of *one* Bogey, just to strike the Bogey *next* to them. In a *flash*, Amanda lowers her wand and watches along with everyone else, as Bogey after Bogey *howls* in agony, as light *bursts* out of them from the inside.

The Bogey begin to *melt* into quivering blobs on the massive cavern floor. Soon, the melted masses of what *had* been the Bogey, begin to flow into one *huge* blob, all flowing *around* the King, Tuladan, who is the last Bogey in the chamber.

Tuladan is shaking, eyes wide, *clearly* in terror. The children all around the cavern are scared, but cannot help but to begin to *cheer*.

“And now Tuladan, *you* will join them, to forever be the *slave* of that which you hate - *light*. You and *all* your kind, will from now to forever, on *this* realm, be *cast* by the light as you always have, but *all* power taken from you.

“Oh yes, you and *all* the Bogey will forever be *awake* and present, wherever *light* may cast you, but you will now and forever, be the *slave* of light, to go where *it* goes, allowed to fall *only* where it allows.

“And now Tuladan, *you* will *forever* regret your *arrogance* to me, the most *powerful* witch who ever lived... or ever *will*! *Nothing* can stop me Tuladan, not *you* and those of the Deep, nor *any* witch, *wizard* or other creature!

“Now that *I* have returned, and I know that I *can* take possession of this child, the *only* thing I seek, is the *Great* Book. Now Tuladan, you will writhe in *pain*, forever a *slave* of the light!”

Amanda twirls her wand and yells, “Lotineaden luminocumba!”

Everyone watches as a bolt *shoots* from Amanda’s wand, passing Tuladan and strikes the cavern floor, just behind the farthest edge of the *massive* blob of quivering *Bogey* goo. The light bursts *brightly* to either side and quickly surrounds the quivering mass. Huge *strands* of light starts *skimming* across the mass, and begins climbing up the *massive* frame of Tuladan. He

*screams* as the ends of the strands of light turn into *huge* hands that grab him by the shoulders, and begin *pulling* him down into the quivering *Bogey* mass at his feet.

It looks as though Tuladan is *melting* as he is pressed down, further into the now *bubbling* mass. He screams in pain shouting, “*Nooooo*, I’ll do *whatever* you wish! I’ll *do* as you say, *save* me, *please!*”

But he is forced down into the mass of goo, until there is *nothing* left of him.

There is a huge *swirl* of light, where again, two *massive* hands made of pure light appear. They quickly *wrap* around the black mass and... *whoosh!* The light *snatches* the black blob of Bogey goo and is *pulled* down a small *crack* in the cavern floor.

Only *silence* remains.

Both the Bogey and the light have *vanished*. Only the dim green din of the cavern is left.

Tia turns to look at Amanda, as do the others.

Amanda starts to *shake* as she begins walking forward, to where the black mass had been. She stops, shaking *violently*. She then says in a strange voice, half her own and half *that* of the one who had been speaking, “No! Get *out* of me! Get *out* of meeee... *now!*”

Amanda’s hair begins to fall, snaps *up* again, falls for a moment, before *flying* back up. “I said, GET *OUT!*” Amanda speaks in her own voice.

“Tia... she’s *trying* to take me over, I can *feel* it! I, I don’t know if I can *fight* her!”

“Amanda! You *have* to! *Fight* her, you *can’t* let her win! You can *do* it, I *know* you can!”

“Get *away* from the other kids!” Amanda says in half her voice, half the witch’s, as she begins to raise her wand.

“Amanda, *no!* You *can’t!*” Tia pleads.

“Get *away* Tia! Do it... *now!* *Trust* me, *please!*” Amanda stammers and begins to stagger.

Tia runs away from the frightened Danahbu and Careabee, coming nervously to stand near Amanda, clearly *frightened* out of her mind and crying hard, looking back to her new friends, and seeing the *fear* on the faces of all the other children.

“Return to your homes and families,” Amanda stutters, “*find* your families, tell them that *all* the Bogey in *The Realm of The Witches* have been *destroyed*, even those *hiding* within the cracks! There is *no* need to fear them here anymore! Be *free* at last!”

Amanda twirls her wand and shoots a bright *blue* bolt in the air, yelling something Tia cannot understand. There is a blinding *purple* flash as the bolt strikes the ceiling, splitting into *dozens* of ribbons of purple light, causing Tia to close her eyes and turn her head away.

When Tia blinks her eyes open and looks up, *all* the children have *disappeared*.

Tia turns just in time to see Amanda’s hair fall to her shoulders. Amanda staggers back a few steps dropping her wand, falls to her knees, then *face* down on the cavern floor, her body gone still.

## Back On Top

[To TOC](#)

Tia kneels at Amanda's side, gently turning her over onto her back, thinking she may be dead. Amanda groans and slowly opens her eyes. Tia gives a short *gasp* as she looks into Amanda's eyes, which are a very *bright* violet.

"Are... are you alright?" Tia asks wiping her eyes as she sniffs, quite frightened, not knowing whether it will be *Amanda's* voice that will answer, or that of the evil witch who had possessed her.

"I, I think so," Amanda says in her own voice, sounding very weak. Tia helps Amanda sit, as Amanda looks around, then asks, "The other kids... did it *work*? Did I send them *home* okay?"

"Uh, well, I don't know," Tia says helping Amanda to her feet. "You shot a *blue* bolt at the ceiling that split apart, and then struck *each* of the kids. It was so bright, I had to *close* my eyes and turn away. When I opened my eyes and looked back, all the kids were *gone*. What did you do?"

"It was really strange. When they were going to kill and... and *eat* you, I got a *shock* from the necklace like I have before. But this time, there was a lot of *yelling* in my head. I don't know *how* to explain it really, but there seemed to be a lot of *fighting* as to who wanted me to do what.

"Then this really loud, *commanding* voice came screaming through, like they were *pushing* the others away, and said that I would obey *her*. Then I, well, I don't *know*. I *tried* to fight her will to take me over. It was *horrible* really - like I was wide awake, but someone *else* was making my body move, and was speaking *through* me. It was really *creepy*."

"How *awful*," Tia says as Amanda bends to pick up her wand.

"Yeah, it was. But the thing is, I now *understand* things a little better. I don't know how it works, but while she was, uh, *using* me, I was, well, like pushed *down* into the necklace, with the *others* trapped there.

"Tia, there are *thousands* of people, and, um, other *horrible* creatures in there too! It's like dropping into another *realm*. I mean, it's *huge* in there! But, since I was neither *in* the necklace, nor *out* really, they couldn't *hurt* me, even though some did *try* to get me. *Scared* me half to death! The thing is though, since I'm not *dead*, and my spirit is still, well, *attached* to me, I don't think they can *ever* hurt me.

"I was told by some, who said they were from the *Light* side, that the necklace was created to *absorb* the spirit of *every* creature that was struck down by the Wielder of the necklace, or someone they *came* upon who had just died and wanted to collect the *spirit* from. And like I said, there are thousands, maybe *millions* of people and *horrible* creatures in there!"

"But, it's only a *necklace* with some gems set in it," Tia says looking at the shining necklace. "So, how could it hold *millions* of spirits?"

"Haven't a clue, but who knows how *big* a being's spirit is anyway?" Amanda says shaking her head, looking around the cavern. "But, I'm *telling* you, it *does*. Bellinora and Ellanya said it did too, but they didn't know for *sure*. But it's true, there are thousands and *thousands* of them in there, and that's only the *one* gem I was in! I saw them as I was flying over them, before I landed. I was told that only the most *evil*, were actually selected to *stay* in the necklace after they enter, once a Wielder set *that* spell on the gems. The weaker ones are simply *destroyed* by the others in the necklace. Over the eons, the necklace has accumulated *millions* upon *millions* of *curses* and spells, of the most *evil* and horrible kind, from hundreds upon *hundreds* of different realms."

“Wow! The necklace must be *really* powerful by now!” Tia says as she and Amanda begin looking into some of the other chambers within the cavern, to see what they could find.

“Oh yeah, it’s *very* powerful! I think it’s even *more* powerful than Bellinora, Jasmine and Ellanya think. I was told that the *Wielder* can summon the *greatest* curses and spells in an *instant*, that will work best for *whatever* circumstance the *Wielder* is facing at the time. Like the *spells* I used in the village to turn *Blaine* to stone, then *break* him apart into pieces. Or how I was able to *do* the things I did, while flying and *shooting* all those spells at the others we fought.”

“That’s really *scary* you know?” Tia says as they come out of another room.

“You have *no* idea,” Amanda says as they walk back into the huge cavern. “Let’s go back over the hill and through that door. My *wand* will work now. We need to find our way back *out* of here.”

“Yeah, okay. So... you, uh, were somehow able to use some *spell* to send the kids... *home*? I mean, there were probably *hundreds* of them here, and maybe *tens* of thousands in other places besides *this* cavern. And how could you *possibly* know where they all *came* from?”

“Well, again, I really don’t know. But, since I had *access* to the information within the necklace, and was thinking about *saving* the kids and returning them to their families, I somehow just... *knew* the right spell.

“That witch, *Eris*, was *really* fighting me, but I guess, for now anyway, I was just *stronger* for some reason. I needed to at least *try* the spell in my head, to send the kids home, before she took more *control* again. I used the spell to not only send the kids that are *here* home, but from *every* part of this *realm*.

“And *all* the Bogey were *killed* too. Not just the ones in this cavern. Then, after the *blast* of light, that witch, um, well, kind of let *go* I guess. Then, like before, I just *passed* out. But *this* time... I remember *everything*!”

“But... you *are* really you now... *aren’t* you?” Tia asks still looking nervous.

“Yeah. Why are you *looking* at me like that? I’m fine, *really*.”

“Okaaaay. But, uh, you know how your eyes changed *color* before when you, well, do your *Wielder* thing?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, your eyes are now a really *bright* violet. They’re really *beautiful* actually. Just thought you should know.”

“*Violet*?” Amanda says with a smile. “Well, I *love* violet, and since my eyes have changed before, then gone back to normal, I’m not as *freaked* out about it as I was before. Come on, let’s get back up the hill and find our way *out* of here.”

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“Well, we’ve managed to get *all* the petals open... *and* closed again,” Tianna says clearly frustrated. “And now that you found that we can leave one or *more* petals open, by pulling that lever on the left to a *second* position we didn’t know about earlier... maybe by opening some *combination* of them, in some order... some *other* door or way out will show up. That’s *all* I’m saying Thian. You have any *better* ideas?”

Thian is at the console, looking at the dials and studying his drawings of the squiggle symbols. “No... not really. Tianna, I’m really *sorry* I yelled at you. It’s not *you* I’m mad at. I’m just getting really *tired* and frustrated is all. I mean, there are *five* petals. That means that there

are some one-hundred and *twenty* possible permutations. We need to get out of here *now*, *not* in a few *days*. Tia and Amanda could be dea...”

“Quiet!” Tianna yells holding her hand up.

“What? What *is* it?” Thian asks quickly looking around the cavern at the Pentagonagram.

“Listen. Do *you* hear that noise? Sounds like it’s coming from over *there*, near the first petal,” Tianna says drawing her wand and flying to hover over the petal.

“Do you think it’s the *Bogey*?!” Sadie cries ducking behind the left hand lever near the console.

“No, it... it *sounds* like... by the Oak and *Ash*, it’s *Tia*! And I think I hear *Amanda*’s voice too! Thian, *open* the first petal... *quick*! Sadie, *pull* your wand and get ready to *shoot* if it’s some kind of *Bogey trick*.”

Sadie runs to her broom, mounts and flies quickly to take a position across from Tianna. Both have their wands pointed at the point of the petal.

Thian begins spinning the dials on the console, studying his paper, then runs to the lever on the right, pulling it down hard. He draws his wand, ducks behind the pedestal and points it at the petal, heart pounding *painfully* in his chest.

The petal begins to rise slowly. At first, there is silence. Then a trembling voice calls, “*Tianna?*”

“Tia! Is that *really* you?” Tianna cries as she flies lower, swooping to one side of the petal, looking hopefully down the glowing stairs.

“It’s *us*! We’re okay, Amanda’s *with* me! We’re coming out, don’t *shoot*!”

Tianna, Thian and Sadie keep their wands trained on the point until they see two small heads peek out over the top of one side of the stairs.

“It *is* them! Don’t *shoot* Thian, it’s *them*!” Tianna cries as she watches her sister climb the last few stairs, clutching her broom like it might get away. As Tia stands on the cavern floor next to the open petal, Amanda climbs out and stands right beside her.

There is *cheering* from everyone. Tia runs to Tianna, hugging her *so* hard, it makes Tianna cry out, but she does not care. Tianna and Tia are in *tears*, as are the others. Sadie runs to hug Amanda, followed closely by a tearful Thian.

Soon, they have all hugged and are laughing and *crying* at the same time.

“Are you two *really* alright?” Thian asks taking a small step back, now that he has actually seen Amanda’s eyes. He raises his arm and pointing says sheepishly, “I mean, uh, your...”

“My *eyes*? Yeah. Tia *told* me. Really, I’m fine, but we both had *quite* a time. We’ll tell you later. Looks like you’ve opened some other petals. Any problems?”

They spend the next hour and a half telling their stories, with much *animation* and lots of drama from Thian.

“I can’t *believe* you got your wand and *broom* back sis! You were lucky to find them in that *treasure* room!”

“Well, since Amanda and I were the *last* ones to be snatched, my stuff was *right* at the base of the pile.”

“I’ve got *your* broom over there,” Thian says pointing to Amanda’s broom resting beside his.

“Well, we’ve *all* had quite an interesting time,” Amanda says with a laugh. “But how did you find out you could have more than *one* petal of the Pentagonagram open at one time?”

“Thian was getting *really* mad,” Sadie says smiling at Thian. “He kept yelling ‘we *have* to get Amanda back. We *have* to get her back.’ Oh, and he would toss in a ‘and Tia *too*’ from time to time.”

Thian turns several shades of pink, and begins picking his fingernails.

"It's okay Thian," Tia says with a laugh, "I love *you* too."

Thian looks up and says to Tia, "I, I only *meant*... I mean..."

They all laugh as Sadie says, "Well, *anyway*, Thian went to close one of the petals and was *so* mad, he pulled down *really* hard, *past* the first clunk. There was a *second* clunk and the petal *stayed* open. We then opened one of the other petals we had already opened. We found that we could *open* one, *close* it, or *leave* it open and do the same with any of the others."

"Yeah, so now we're kind of thinking, since we've already opened *all* of them one at a time," Tianna says looking at Amanda, "that *maybe* if we open them in the right *combination*, maybe some *other* door or way out will show up. But Thian figures there are at least *one*-hundred and twenty permutations to try, which could take *forever*... just to keep *track* of which ones we've tried."

The kids decide that there is nothing else to do, and so set about opening a petal, leaving it open while opening another. Then closing *some* while leaving others open.

It had been about an hour and a half, when Thian pulls the handle down to close one of the petals, and there is a *thunderous* rumbling sound as the floor begins to shake.

"Oh *God*!" Amanda shouts, "Look! The *center* of the Pentagon is *dropping*!"

Everyone is terrified as they draw their wands.

"Quick! *Mount* up!" Tianna yells. "Get ready to fly the *heck* out of here and back into the *tunnel* for cover."

The center of the Pentagon continues to drop as the kids mount and join Tianna, who is hovering some distance away from the descending center of the Pentagon.

"Look, that center piece that's dropping is getting *smaller* as it goes down!" Sadie cries. "There are *stairs* there as it goes down and gets smaller too."

Sure enough, the centerpiece is *shrinking* as it drops, revealing stairs glowing a soft blue as it lowers.

After a full minute, the rumbling stops and everything falls silent.

Everyone moves forward slowly, wands at the ready and hearts beating *wildly*, until they are hovering directly over the huge stair-lined hole.

"By the *moons*," Tia says panting and holding one hand to her chest. "That *scared* me almost as bad as the *Bogey*! Look at the *size* of this hole. What do you think's down there?"

"I don't know," Tianna says swallowing hard, looking pale. "But, I hope *this* leads to the way out of here. At least we know there aren't any *Bogey* down there, thanks to Amanda. At least that's *something*. But, we're pretty much out of options. Who wants to go first?"

They all look to one another for a moment, then Thian says, "Well, like before, I think maybe all but *one* or two of us should go have a look. Sadie, why don't you stay here at the controls, and get ready to pull the close handle okay?"

Sadie nods and flies back to the lever on the left side of the console.

"Tianna, I *know* you want to be in the *fight* if there is one," Thian says, turning to Tianna. "But, you are one of the *best* shots too, and have a *better* chance of hitting whatever may come *out* from down there, *if* we find something, than any of the rest of us. So, can you find a *good* spot over the hole, maybe *half* to three quarters of the way down, so you can shoot *past* us if we need to fly out quick?"

Tianna frowns for a moment, then Tia says, "He's *right* you know. You're the *best* shot out of all of us, uh, except maybe for *Amanda*, when she's, well..."

“Not really *her* and doing her *Wielder* thing.” Tianna says looking to Amanda. “Yeah. Okay. I guess you’re right. But be *really* careful you guys. I mean, we just all got back *together* and everything. I’d kind of like to *keep* it that way you know?”

They all nod, then Thian says, “Okay. I’ll go down first. Tia, you next, six to eight feet behind okay?”

Tia nods.

Thian continues, “Amanda, *you* come next, again, about six to eight feet behind Tia. Tianna, you last. If *anything* happens, turn and fly the heck *out* of there. Tianna will watch our backs. Okay. Let’s go.”

With that, Thian looks down the very deep hole, licks his lips, blinks a few times, and slowly begins his descent.

Tia watches Thian for a few seconds, then begins descending after him, floating slowly, followed by a *very* shaky Amanda, then Tianna. All have their wands pulled and are ready to blast *anything* they see.

After several moments of squinting into the dim blue light from the stairs, Thian says, “Oh *great!*” as he comes to a stop and hovers just over half way down the hole.

“What? *What* do you see Thian?” Tia asks as she, Amanda and Tianna come to an instant stop, whipping their wands from side to side below them, their eyes wide.

“Doors... *five* of them!” Thian says clearly flustered, shaking his head. “One door on *each* side of the flat areas that make up the Pentagram. The stairs just *end* at the top of the doors, then, there looks like a drop of about *fifteen* feet to the floor, where the center piece that lowered is. Good thing we have *brooms*.”

“Well, let’s go down and at least take a *look* at them,” Tia says, looking over her shoulder to Amanda, then to Tianna, who both nod in agreement.

Thian begins to drop, with Tia and Amanda close behind. Tianna decides to stay at about the half-way point and take up a good position to fight from there.

Thian hovers at the top of the closest door for a moment, listening. He then lowers to the floor, dismounts and turning in a slow circle, points his lit wand in turn, to each of the five wooden doors.

Tianna hears Sadie call down to her, wanting to know what they found. Tianna calls back telling her about the five doors, and to stay put.

Sadie then yells down, “Uh-uh. *I’m* coming too. I’m not staying up *here* by myself. Besides, if the wands are *glowing*, that means they *work*. If *all* of us are down there and the center closes somehow, the only thing it will do is lift us *up!* And anyway, if something tries to come through all those doors, there will be *five* of us to blast ‘em.”

Sadie disappears from view for a moment, then flies over the edge of the hole and down to Tianna, who has a small smile on her face. “You know, you remind me a lot of someone I *know* and admire.”

“Who?” Sadie asks looking down into the hole.

“*Me.*” Tianna says with a true smile. “Come on, let’s see what’s down there.”

In a few moments, Sadie and Tianna have reached the bottom. Sadie dismounts beside Amanda, while Tianna hovers near one of the doors.

“Well,” Tianna says looking around, “There are five doors and *five* of us. Should we each take a door and see what we find?”

“Wait. Sadie?” Amanda says looking at the tiny girl, who is staring intently at the door in front of her. “Are *you* alright?”

“Huh? Oh yeah. I was just looking inside. I should have *thought* of that before. I tried with the door that had the *Bogey* behind it, but didn’t see *anything* remember? I thought maybe I just wasn’t good enough to see behind the doors, you know, like I saw through the cavern walls and floor, to find all of *you* in the well, and the entrance to Witch Mountain. Or that maybe some kind of anti-*sight* penetration spell was in this area. But, it wasn’t because I *couldn’t* do it - it was because when I tried, the total dark of the Bogey’s *domain* was just that... *dark*. I thought I couldn’t *see* behind the door, but what I was seeing was simply the *dark* from the spell of that witch you told us about.”

“Can you see anything... behind *that* door then?” Tia asks hopefully.

“Ooooooh *yeah*. I *can*, and I wouldn’t *open* it if I were you. There are hidden *spikes* in the walls and floor. If we go in there, we’ll be *stabbed* by *hundreds* of sharp sticks. They seem to go beyond the distance I’m capable of penetrating, so the spikes must be *triggered* either by, like stepping on a *trigger* stone, or maybe some kind of Wizitch *proximity* detector, like Amanda had fallen into on earth.”

“By the *moons*, are you *sure* Sadie?” Thian asks, beginning to chew on his lower lip.

“You want to go in and *check*?” Tianna snorts. “Sadie found all of *us*, and that’s *good* enough for me. But hey, if *you* want to see for yourself, be our *guest*,” she says waving her arm playfully toward the door with a smile.

“Uh, *no*, no... that’s okay,” Thian says with a laugh too. “If *Sadie* says there are spikes in there... Sadie, what’s inside the door *Tia*’s leaning against? Can you see in there too?”

Sadie walks over and stands in front of the door, as Tia moves aside.

“I’ll try.” Sadie then unfocuses her eyes, leans forward a little, as though trying to see a speck of dirt on the door. “Oh!” she cries, quickly stepping back, holding her wand out in front of her.

“*What?!*” Thian cries, pulling Amanda back around behind him, as Tia jumps further aside. “What *is* it?”

“There’s... uh, some kind of *three* headed... um, *thing* right behind the door. It’s really *ugly* and has long tongues, and its *drooling*. It *knows* we’re here, and it’s just *waiting* for us to open the door. It’s about *eight* feet tall and *really* long. It’s *swishing* its long tail too.”

Tia has both hands over her mouth, and looks ready to pass out. She had been resting her back up against that door, and knows now, that if it weren’t for *Sadie*, she most likely would have opened it just to take a *peek* inside out of curiosity.

Thian is half crouched to the floor, wand at the ready in one hand, holding Amanda’s free hand in the other.

“Well... let’s not open *that* one okay?” Amanda says with a nervous laugh. “I’ve had *quite* enough excitement for the day, thank you *very* much. And as much as I *love* animals, I can do without the ones, well, who want to *eat* me.”

“Yeah, I’m with *you* on this one Amanda!” Tianna says laughing nervously. “So, Sadie, how about door number *three*?”

Sadie steps up to the next door and unfocuses her eyes again. “The only thing I see on the other side is an *empty* corridor. Nothing there I can see.”

“How about *this* one?” Amanda asks pointing to the next door.

Sadie steps up and stares at door number four. She begins looking up the sides of the door, across the top and down the other side.

“What? What’s *wrong*?” Thian asks as he too stares at the door.

“I, I don’t *know* really. There’s a corridor there too. But...”

“What Sadie?” Tianna asks as she hovers to one side for a better look.

“Well, I see what I *think* is a long corridor. The walls inside don’t look like they have *spikes* or anything. The floor looks okay too, but... well, the *ceiling* is kind of strange.”

“Strange?” Thian asks looking confused. “What do you mean... *strange*?”

“It kind of looks like *two* ceilings. But *that* can’t be right... *can* it? I mean, when I look up, it kind of *looks* like a ceiling. But it goes up about five feet I think, then there’s like... a *dark* line, then solid rock... like a *normal* ceiling underground would be. What do you think it is?”

“We’ve read about these before you know,” Tia says looking at Tianna.

“When? I don’t remember anything about a ceiling that has...” Tianna’s eyes fly open and her jaw drops. “By the Oak and *Ash* sis! Are you talking about those *ancient* cities that used all kinds of *traps*? Like the ones that used a *false* ceiling, that would drop down on people when they stepped on a *trip* stone? By the *moons*, I think you’re *right*! I *think* that’s what it is! A ceiling that will fall to the floor and *squash* us like a *bug* under your foot, then reset again for any *other* unsuspecting people. By the *moons*!”

“Well, I guess that just leaves this *last* door then,” Thian says swallowing hard, pointing to door number five which is right next to him.

“Yeah, okay,” Sadie says as she steps over to it. “Well, *this* is interesting. I don’t see anything but *solid* rock for as far as my abilities can penetrate. So, for at *least* fifteen feet or so, it looks like a good portion of this corridor has *caved* in. I can’t see *anything* but solid rock.”

“Well then,” Tianna says hovering low to the cavern floor. “Unless this one that caved in is the real way out, there’s only *one* other door that we can open and not, well, have *something* happen to us, at least, not right *away* anyhow.”

Thian walks to the door that only has the corridor on the other side, at least as far as they know anyway. “Well, I think before we open it, let’s get our *travelers* packs, and be ready to move on, just in case it *is* the way out.”

They all agree, fly back up top, and gather their things. They fly back down the hole, coming to a hover in front of the door.

“Well then, let’s have a look inside okay?” Thian says nervously. “Be ready to fly back up the stairs... just in case.”

Everyone moves to a hover in various positions, taking the best vantage point they can, to shoot whatever may be on the other side of the door when Thian opens it.

With everyone in position, Thian holds up his hands saying, “Orathian!”

There is a *clanking* sound which makes its way up the door. The door pops open just a little. After a moment’s hesitation, since nothing has happened, Thian hovers closer, then pulls on the circular door ring. The door *creaks* open.

“Well, looks okay so far,” Tia says watching Thian now maneuver his broom around the side of the door. He then pulls it fully open.

“I’m going to fly in a ways to check things out,” Thian says looking back to the others. “Tia, like *before* okay? Tianna, Amanda... get ready if something goes wrong. Sadie, I want *you* beside me. Use your, uh, *powers*, to look around as we go, like when we were walking in Bellinora’s cave.”

“Okay, I’ll try.” Sadie says, her little legs trembling over the sides of her broom. She slowly moves up beside Thian and looks down the dark pathway.

“Okay. Come on Tia,” Thian says. “let’s check this out. But *stay* away from the sides of the walls okay?”

“Don’t worry. I’m staying in the *center* of the pathway. Even though Amanda says the *Bogey* are gone... I’m not taking *any* chances!”

With that, Thian begins flying slowly down the pathway, with Sadie right beside him. Their wands emitting a soft blue, and held at the ready, Thian constantly looks around for any sign of movement, while Sadie tries to scan inside the walls, ceiling and flooring for any hidden danger.

The pathway curves several times, both to the left and right, then begins to rise at about a twenty-five degree angle. After eight more minutes, the slope levels out and they soon approach another large *wooden* door.

“Uh-oh,” Thian says as he and Sadie come to a stop in front of it.

Tia, who has been flying backward, spins around and comes up beside them. “Sadie? What do you see?”

“I’m not really sure, but it *kind* of looks like another cavern of some kind. No, wait. Not actually a *cavern*, but some kind of long narrow *room*, and... I think I see some kind of dim *light*.”

“*Light*? Really?” Thian asks looking to Tia, then back to Sadie. “Do you see... anything *moving* in there?”

“Not that I can see. I don’t see any *traps* either, but like I said, I’m just not sure.”

“It’s okay Sadie,” Tia says with a smile. “Listen, I’m going to fly back real quick and get Tianna and Amanda. Don’t open the door till we get back okay.”

“Oh, *don’t* worry,” Thian says with a laugh. “We’re not gonna do *anything* till we’re all here.”

Tia flies quickly back down the slope and around the curve, then disappears.

When Tia reaches Tianna and Amanda, she tells them what they found, and what Sadie said she had seen.

Before the three of them fly off to meet Thian and Sadie, Tianna says, “Well, since there *was* a time when we went through a door and couldn’t *open* it again, I’m going to *jam* this door open, so it won’t close. If we find something behind that door Thian and Sadie are at, and it, or *they* try to get us, I don’t want to be *trapped* behind this door. This way, if we need to, we can fly back through this door and up, then *close* the center to the Pentagon, while keeping whoever, or *whatever*, down in the hole.”

With that, Tianna dismounts and, collecting a large tapered stone, jams it firmly against the opening of the opened door. She mounts and the three of them fly quickly off to join Thian and Sadie.

It is several minutes later when Sadie and Thian notice a bright blue light coming from behind and below them. They both dismount and turn to see their friends flying quickly up the slope, wands *blazing* and waving around as they approach.

“Have you seen anything *moving* in there since I left?” Tia asks as she and the others arrive and dismount.

“No. It looks the *same* to me,” Sadie says nervously. “I’ve looked around the best I can, and I just can’t see *anything* but a long narrow room of some kind... I *think*, then some dim light too.”

“Okay Thian. Time to get ‘er open and let’s see what we find,” Amanda says pointing her wand at the door. The others do the same as Thian steps to the door.

“Orathian!”

The door *clicks* then pops open a little. Thian grabs the bronze ring and pulls it open enough to stick his head around.

“She’s *right*,” Thian says pulling the door fully open. “Look. It’s a long rectangular room. It’s completely covered in smooth, *polished* green and brown marble tiles. Come on, let’s see what’s inside.”

They enter the long rectangular room cautiously, still expecting *something* to spring out and attack them as they enter.

“Wait! Do you think it’s okay to *walk* on the tiles?” Tia asks no one in particular. “I mean, couldn’t one of *these* tiles be a trigger stone of some kind, like *before*?”

Everyone freezes where they are, all eyes wide.

## The Glass Panels

### [To TOC](#)

“Oh *golly*,” Amanda says as her eyes grow wide and she snatches her foot back, just as she is about to step on another tile.

“Sadie, can you see anything *under* the tiles?” Tianna asks with a shaky voice.

Sadie looks down and begins looking around her. “No, not *yet*. But all of you stay here and I’ll take a look around the room okay.”

No one moves, each standing perfectly still on the tile they are standing on. Over the next several minutes, Sadie walks over every tile in the room, while also looking at the walls and ceiling. *Skipping* back from the far side of the room, she says brightly, “It’s okay... I didn’t see anything *bad* at all. This is kind of *fun* really. I think I’m getting the hang of this *sight* penetration thing.”

Everyone laughs and gives a huge sigh. They all walk freely into the long room.

“This is a really *weird* room you know?” Thian says turning in a full circle. There’s no other door in here, no pentagram, dials or *pedestals* with levers on ‘em. And what are all those thin long wooden *boards* on the floor against that long wall for?”

Amanda looks to the left side of the long room, and counts twenty-five boards fastened to the tile floor. Each board is an inch high, by two inches wide, by about twenty-five feet in length. She sees that each is spaced six inches apart, as they make their way into the room away from the wall.

“Look!” Tia says looking up. “There are the *same* number of boards on the tiled ceiling too. They look like they’re *directly* over the ones on the floor. Weird.”

Thian heads for the boards on the floor, the others heading off after him. “That’s strange. Each of the boards has a *slot* cut into them, running all the way along the *length* of them. Looks like about half an inch wide too.” Then looking at the ceiling boards, “*Those* have the same thing. I wonder what they’re for?”

“Don’t know,” Tianna says turning and pointing to a wooden bench placed against the opposite long wall. “But whatever it’s for, looks like you at least get to *sit* and rest in here. Long bench too. Looks like it’s about *fifteen*-feet long I’d say.”

“What’s all that against the back wall?” Amanda asks pointing to what looks like vertical dividers, extending from floor to ceiling. The dividers extend from the far wall, about ten feet into the room, then go *completely* from one side of the room to the other against the back wall.

“Let’s take a look and see,” Sadie says skipping that way. The others all follow her, Tianna *skipping* too, making the others laugh. They stand in front of the dividers.

“Looks like... *glass* panels?” Tia asks turning to Tianna.

“Yeah, *looks* like it. They look like they’re about a half inch thick too. They must be like, *nine* feet tall I think - about the same height as the ceiling.”

“What do you think they’re for?” Sadie asks trying to pull one out, which does not budge.

“Don’t know,” Tianna says walking to one end of the rack. “Hey, *look*, you can see these pretty well over here.”

The others walk over and stand beside her.

“Wow!” Amanda says looking at several glass panels placed side-by-side in the divider. “Some of these panels are only about *six* inches wide. That one in the *middle* is what? Like two *feet* wide or so? And the one next to it looks like it’s *four* feet wide... maybe. Can’t really see those others behind them though.”

Amanda turns around slowly to look back toward the door they had entered from. Then, startled says, “Hey! What’s *that*?” pointing to the far side of the room, at what appears to be a lectern standing in the corner on the same side of the room as the bench. “*That* wasn’t there when we came in, and when Sadie was looking for something under the floor. When did *that* show up?”

“Whoa!” Thian says as they all began walking slowly to the lectern. “Now that’s *really* weird for *sure*! There’s something on it. Let’s see what it is.”

They reach the lectern and for a moment, just stand staring at the ancient looking, flat, leather bound book.

Thian reaches out and flips the hard leather cover open. Inside is a *single* sheet of parchment. Nothing more.

“I can’t *see*,” Sadie says as she jumps up and down trying to see what they are looking at.

Thian picks up the book and sits on the floor, the others now doing the same, making a circle.

This is what everyone sees:

[illegible]

Thian flips the page and they see that there is nothing written on the back of the parchment. He flips it back and everyone looks once again at the writing.

“Well, at least it’s written in that *witch* language,” Amanda says with half a smile. “And we can all read *that* now, thanks to Sadie. So, Thian, what does it say?”

“Oh, well, hang on a sec’,” Thian’s face changes to one of intense concentration. He smiles, having seen the writing change and morph into his native elf writing, then gets a strange, puzzled look.

“Well? What’s *wrong* Thian?” Tianna asks. “Can’t you *read* it?”

“Yeah, I can, but it doesn’t make any *sense*. It says, ‘Choose well and you live. Choose wrong and your doom awaits you. Only nine will pass while the others perish.’ Then it has a line of nothing but *gibberish*. Here look for yourself.”

Thian passes the book across to Tianna, who focuses on it for a moment, then with a similar puzzled expression says, “You’re right. I don’t *get* it. Here sis, you take a look at it.”

Tia looks it over, then passes it to Sadie, who looks at it for several moments, then passes it to Amanda.

Amanda studies the writing very carefully, reads the message, then sets the book in the center of the circle saying slowly, “Choose *well* and you live. Choose *wrong* and your doom awaits you. Only *nine* will pass while the others perish.’ Huh? Choose *what* well? And what does it mean, ‘*nine* will pass while the others *perish*’? Nine? Nine *people*? If so... *who*? And we have *no* idea how many may have *passed* already. And, if *nine* have already, well, *passed*, would we... all *perish*?”

No one has any clue as to what this means. Tianna says, “What about that long line under what was written. It didn’t mean *anything* to me at all. Did it mean anything to any of you?”

They all shake their heads.

“Well, it must mean *something*,” Amanda says furrowing her brows, looking intently at the writing on the parchment. “I mean, *somebody* put it on this parchment, then in this room, for *some* reason. Heeey, maybe the words are all run *together* or something, and we have to *break* the line apart into individual *words*. Like some kind of *puzzle*.”

“Yeah, that’s a *great* idea!” Thian says pulling his little notebook from his pants pocket, along with his pen. “Let me write the line down in my notebook, then see what we get.”

They all wait patiently while Thian, very carefully, concentrates on the Theban writing, and copies the letters down in his native Elvish.

“Okay, *got* it,” Thian says with a smile. Looking at the line on his notebook, his smile quickly fades. “Well, I get the word ‘*at*’ at the beginning of the line, but *nothing* makes any sense after that. Here, *look*,” handing the notebook to Tianna.

After several moments, Tianna says, “Maybe you copied it *down* wrong. Let *me* try okay.”

“I *didn’t* copy it wrong!” Thian says rather stung. “I was *really* careful and took my time.”

“Yeah? Well, *I’d* like to do it myself *anyway* if you don’t mind,” Tianna snaps.

“*Fine*, go ahead. But I’m *telling* you, I copied it *letter* for letter.”

“When you’re done,” Amanda says timidly, “I’d like to copy it too. Not that I think you copied it *wrong* though Thian, I’d just like a copy for myself, so I can *try* to find out what it says too. Maybe the words *aren’t* right beside each other you know. Maybe, the *real* words are *backward* instead, or *spaced* out, or *something*.”

“Yeah... well, *maybe*,” Thian says grudgingly. “Maybe we *all* should have a copy, then maybe with all of us looking at it, we can *spot* something.”

Once Amanda has translated the Theban into English letters, this is what the line looks like:

atnednnooganeeglyasolicnoarhepstduulptathenylahnoayybreIrchirragsoaemswnlippbaeaestr  
nifz

The kids puzzle over the line for almost an hour, but no one can make *any* sense of what they see. No matter *how* they try to break things apart, they cannot read a thing.

“This is *useless!*” Tianna says crumpling up and tossing her piece of paper on the floor, into the already *growing* pile beside her. “It doesn’t make *any* sense at all! It’s just a long line of *gibberish*. It may as well be in *code* or something.”

After a few moments of grumbling agreement from the others, Thian, who had walked over and was sitting on the long bench, jumps up, “*Code!* That’s *it!* Tianna, you’re *brilliant!*”

“Well, *yeah*, I know,” Tianna says with a laugh. “But, why am I brilliant *this* time?”

“Code! I’m sure now that this is a line of *code*. You know how *Loki* and I like codes and stuff, and we’ve done *lots* of different kinds of ‘em over the years. With the *length* of this one, and since there isn’t much *else* on the parchment, and, since we’ve *tried* everything else, I think it’s *code!*”

“Great... so *what?*” Tianna asks with a snort. “You told me *years* ago, that there are hundreds, if not *thousands* of different codes and ciphers. And you said that some could take *years* to break, and that some have *never* been broken. We could *starve* to death before we ever break this... if it *is* in code that is!”

After a somewhat *heated* exchange between Tianna and Thian, as to what code it could be, and whether Thian is *smart* enough to break it, Thian holds up both hands. “Stop! There are thousands, maybe *millions* upon *millions* of codes and ciphers Tianna. But I think *this* one is what’s called a Block Cipher of sorts. To decipher it, you need what’s known as a *Cipher* Key.

“How does a block cipher work Thian?” Tia asks rubbing her throbbing temples.

“Well, I’ll give you a really *simple* and short one, so you can see how it works. Give me a minute and I’ll write one out.

Tianna gets up, and working a kink from her neck says, “I’m going to take another look at those glass panels. I need to stretch my legs a little anyway. Sadie, you want to come take a look too?”

“Sure,” Sadie says as she gets up and takes Tianna’s hand.

“I’m coming too,” Tia says. “I need a *break*.”

“Wait for me,” Amanda says quickly getting up, dusting off her bottom. “Let us know when you’ve got something to show us Thian.”

The girls walk off to the back of the room, where the glass panels are.

After a few minutes, Thian shouts, “*Okay*, I’ve got a simple one to show you if you want to see how they work.”

The others come back to the bench where Thian is sitting and sit down. Amanda and Tia sit on his left, while Tianna and Sadie sit on his other side, so everyone can see.

“Okay. Say I wanted to write a *secret* message that would be *really* hard to break. Using the block cipher, you choose some *word* or words. These are known as the *cipher* key. In this example, I’m just gonna use my *first* name. So, the *cipher* key we’re going to use is... *Thian*.

“You write the cipher key out, with the letters spaced a little bit apart, just to make things easier. You then draw a line under the cipher key, like I have here. Then, you say the first letter of the alphabet, and see if *that* letter appears *anywhere* in the cipher key. If it *does*, and it’s the *first* match, you write the number *one* under that letter. So, we start with the letter ‘a’ and look through our cipher key to see if the letter ‘a’ is anywhere in it. We *do* find the letter ‘a,’ and since it is the *first* match we’ve found, we put the number *one* under that letter ‘a’.

“We then look to see if there are any *more* matches for the letter ‘a’ in the cipher key. If there is, working from *left* to right through the key, we would put the number *two* under *that* ‘a,’ since it would be the *second* match. If there are no more matches for the letter ‘a,’ we move on to the next letter of the alphabet.

“So, since there were no more matches found for the letter ‘a’ in our example, we now look for the letter ‘b.’ We don’t find any, so we move on to the letter ‘c,’ and so on, till we find the next match. In our example, the *next* match is the letter ‘h.’ Since that is our *second* match... we write the number *two* under that letter... then continue looking for that letter, across the key to the *right*, to see if there are any more matches for the letter ‘h.’ You keep going through the alphabet until *all* the letters in the key have a *number* under them, in the *order* that they were matched. So, this is what we have so far.”

Thian shows his pad to Tianna and Sadie, then to Amanda and Tia. This is what Amanda sees on his pad:

<b>t</b>	<b>h</b>	<b>i</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>

“Yeah, okay, I get it *so* far,” Amanda says nodding. “So, what do you do next?”

“Ahhhh... now you begin writing whatever *message* you want,” Thian says with a grin. “The simple message I want to have in code, or *cipher* is, ‘hi Amanda.’ Yeah, I *know*, it’s short, but this is just a *simple* example after all. Loki and I now usually extend the vertical lines of this graph, *down* the page a ways, to give us plenty of room. Like this:

<b>t</b>	<b>h</b>	<b>i</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>

They all look at the graph Thian has drawn on the next page of his pad.

“Now, *all* you do is write out your message, without *any* spacing, in the grid blocks. Loki and I write from *top* to bottom and from *left* to right, which is the way most wizards and *witches* do it today actually. But you *could* write from right to left or from bottom to top, or in some combination.

“When you reach the end of a row, you just continue writing your message beginning in the *next* row. When you’re finished, if there are *any* leftover areas in that row, you fill them in with the alphabet, but going back and forth from the *end* of the alphabet, to the *beginning*, then to the end, and *back* and forth, until that row has been filled. Don’t worry, this’ll make sense in a minute.

“So,” Thian says flipping the page on his notebook. “On this *next* page, I’ve written my message, see.”

This is what Thian has on his page:

t	h	i	a	n
5	2	3	1	4
h	i	a	m	a
n	d	a	z	a

“See how I filled in the *end* of the row with ‘z, a’?” So we *now* have our completed cipher grid, with everything we need to *write* the real cipher. The actual writing of the message, takes up *five* columns, by *two* rows. That makes this a *five-by-two* block cipher.

“Okay, I get it so far... I *think*,” Tianna says nodding. “So, how do you change this into the *code* line, and how do you change the *code* back into a *message* you can read?”

“Well, the *coding* is easy. You use the numbered *columns* to write the code. Like this. You look across the numbers until you find the first number - number *one*. Then looking *down* that column, you begin to write what letters you find, in *that* column, on a piece of paper - but writing from *left* to right. Well, in *our* example anyway.”

“Huh?” Tia says shaking her head.

“Here look,” Thian says with a laugh. We look across the row of numbers, looking for the *first* number... which is the number *one*. Now we start writing what we see in that *column* beneath that number. What we see *first* in that column, is the letter ‘m,’ so, we write it down on a piece of paper. Then we continue looking *down* that column for the next letter... which is the letter ‘z.’ You keep doing that for each letter you find in that *column*.

“When you reach the bottom, you then look for the next number in sequence - the number *two*. You then continue writing the letters you find *down* that column, *next* to the letters you’ve already written. Then move on to the next number, and so on.

“So, in our example, for the column numbered *one*, we get ‘mz.’ For the column numbered *two*, we write ‘id’ *next* to what we already have. So now, we have, ‘mzid.’ *See?*”

“Oh, I *think* I get it,” Amanda says with a grin. “So, since that’s all that’s in column two, we look for the number *three*. We write down the letters in *that* column, working *down* the column. So, in column three, we find the letters ‘aa’ and would write *them* next to the others we’ve already written. So, now we have, ‘mzidaa,’ is that right?”

“Yep, you *got* it. So, Tianna, what would we do next?”

“Find column *four*, and write down whatever we find down *that* column, next to what we already have. So, we find the letters ‘aa’ *again* in this case, in that column, and after adding those letters to what we *have*, we now get, ‘mzidaaaa’. Yeah, I think I get it now too. You get it Sadie?”

“Uh-huh. We now look for column five, and we find the letters, ‘hn’ and write them down too. So, since there aren’t any more column numbers, our finished coded message would be, ‘mzidaaaahn’ *right?*”

Thian laughs, “*Very* good. Yeah, *that’s* how you can take *any* word or words as a *key*, then create a grid under the letters you used for that key, but *no* spaces. Fill in the *first* row under the

key with the *numbers* matching the alphabet, in the *order* you find them. Then write the message out, then create the actual *code*, by finding each numbered column in turn, and writing down the letters found in each numbered column, from *top* to bottom, till you've finished.

"Just *remember*, and it's *really, really* important, that if you have *any* blank blocks in the last row when writing the message in the grid, to fill in *those* blanks with alternating letters of the *alphabet*, from the *end* first, then to the *beginning*, and repeat as needed. Like 'z a y b x c' and so on."

"But, why do you *need* to do that?" Tianna asks looking confused.

"*Great* question, and to answer that, I need to tell you how you would *send* the code, or *leave* it for someone.

"So, we now have our finished message in a line of cipher, which is, 'mzidaaaahn'. If I sent *this* to you, you'd have no idea what to *do* with it. And no matter *how* hard you try, you won't find any meaning in it. To *decipher* this, you need *two* things. The *cipher* key, which in this case is *Thian*, and the *number* of rows used to create the message."

"Okay, I get that you would need the *key* for the cipher, but why the number of *rows*?" Tia asks looking at the message.

"I'll show you in a second. Okay, looking at the grid we created, we count the number of rows *below* the row of numbers. In other words, *only* the rows our actual message takes up. Remember, the *cipher* key is always written first, to determine the number of *columns* needed for making the grid. You then always create the *numbers* beneath the cipher key. Next, you count the number of rows used in the actual message... *including* any line with the filled-in letters to *complete* the last row.

"In our example message, we have *two* completed rows. That means, our message grid is a *five* column by *two* row grid. It would actually be called a five-by-two block cipher. I guess they call it a *block* cipher, because the grid squares look like a bunch of *blocks* put together to build something.

"Now that we have all the information we need, we now need to *get* the information to whoever we want, to *reconstruct* the cipher *and* decipher it. The *trick* is in how you send them the information."

"What do you mean?" Amanda asks puzzled.

"The one receiving the message needs *three* things... the *cipher* key, the number of *rows* needed, *and* the coded message. Many times, people use the *same* cipher key all the time. Like, let's say *we* all decide to write coded messages between us, so no one *else* would know how to read them if the message was intercepted. And, we all decide to use, uh... 'stuttering snorkrats' as the cipher key..."

"Why wouldn't we just use one of our *names*?" Tianna asks curiously.

"Because so many people *did* in the old days. So, if the message were *taken* from you, they would first try *your* name, then the names of your friends, *pets*, family members and things like that. It's *best* to use something most people wouldn't *think* of, but something you and your *friends* can remember. You could even use a made up name, or write something *backward*.

"If we *always* used the same cipher key, then the only things we need to *send* are the number of *rows* and the coded message itself. But... let's say I thought someone *had* found out our cipher key, and I needed to get you a message, but needed to make up a *new* cipher key. I'd need to send you *that* cipher key, the *number* of rows *and* the message."

"But *how*? Wouldn't someone looking at whatever you sent figure it out?" Sadie asks.

“Not usually,” Thian smiles. “Loki and I figured out a way, and we use it *all* the time. We put a bunch of numbers, separated by *dashes* into a letter we send to each other. It’s *easier* if I show you how we do it. Here, look, I’ll use the example we just finished.”

Thian writes the following on another page of his notebook:

*Thian* here Tia, I think the answers are 543-22-11-7658, but I’m not sure.  
Mzidaaaaahn

“*See?*” Thian smiles. “We *begin* the letter with the *cipher* key. In this case, *Thian*. Then... *somewhere* in the message, we put in a bunch of numbers separated with dashes. Loki and I *always* use the *third* block of numbers, as the number of rows needed...”

“But there are only *two* rows Thian, not *eleven*,” Tianna says shaking her head.

“Yep, that’s *right*. But Loki and I took the numbering scheme a little further. We now know we need to count over to the *third* block of numbers, because that’s where Loki and I decided to *always* have the answer to the rows. Of course, you *could* pick any place, but you better *remember* it.

“If, in that *third* block of numbers, you find only *one* digit, like the number two, *seven*, nine and such, that *is* the number of rows. But... if you find *more* than one number in that block, you *add* each of those *digits* to arrive at the *real* number of rows. So in this case...”

“You find the number *eleven*, but since there is more than a *single* digit, we *add*. So, one plus one equals *two*, which is the *real* number of rows for the grid!” Amanda says with a huge grin. Amanda continues. “So, if we had decided to use something like ‘stuttering snorkrats’ and the number of rows in our original grid was, say, *twenty-five*, we could write something like... give me your pad for a second.”

Amanda then writes the following:

Stuttering snorkrats Thian! Can’t you remember anything? The serial number is: 22-8796-55555-876-53-11.

“Or something like *this?*” Amanda asks handing the pad back to Thian. “And of course, the coded *message* too.”

“Yeah that’s it,” Thian says laughing. But if you are going to use more than *one* word for the key, we either put them in *quotes* or *italics*. Otherwise, in *your* message Amanda, we wouldn’t know if the key was ‘stuttering,’ ‘snorkrats,’ ‘Thian,’ or, ‘stuttering snorkrats Thian.’ See what I *mean*? In the one I did using my *name*, I put it in *italics*.”

“Oh, yeah, that would make sense.”

“But I *still* don’t get why you needed to fill in the last row with *gibberish*,” Tia asks.

“Oh, I *forgot*. You need to have all blocks filled in within *every* row, so when you reconstruct the message, you know where to stop writing the message down the columns. Again, it’s *easier* if I show you. To *decode* our message, looking at the letter that was sent to us, we *know* the cipher key is *Thian*. So, we begin by constructing a grid using *that* cipher key, and the numbering beneath it, like so:

<b>t</b>	<b>h</b>	<b>i</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>

“Now, we need to look at the actual coded message, which is, ‘mzidaaaahn.’ Since we have looked at the *third* block of numbers in the letter sent to us, and now know that the number of rows we need is *two*, we can add those rows to the grid, so now we have:

<b>t</b>	<b>h</b>	<b>i</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>

“That’s our *finished* grid. Now we need to fill in the blocks with the right *letters* from the coded message. Here’s how *I* do it. Since I *know* there are going to be *two* rows, and everything is done by *column*, top to bottom, the *first* thing I do is use a pen or pencil, to break the coded message into the number of *rows* that were indicated. Here look.”

This is what Thian wrote:

mz id aa aa hn

“Now, the *first* two letters go in one column, the *next* two in another column and so on. Since the ‘mz’ is at the *beginning* of the coded message, I *know* that those first two letters need to be placed in the column, which has been labeled with the number *one*. *Not* put in the *first* column... but in the column with the *number* one in it... which in our case is the *fourth* column... *see*? That’s where we found the letter ‘a’ in our cipher key. So the first two letters in our coded message go in that column. Our grid now looks like this:

<b>t</b>	<b>h</b>	<b>i</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>
			<b>m</b>	
			<b>z</b>	

“The *next* two letters we find in the coded message, are placed in the *column* with the number *two* in it, and now we get:

<b>t</b>	<b>h</b>	<b>i</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>
	<b>i</b>		<b>m</b>	
	<b>d</b>		<b>z</b>	

“The next two go in the column numbered three, and we get:

t	h	i	a	n
5	2	3	1	4
	i	a	m	
	d	a	z	

“The next two go in column four, like *this*:

t	h	i	a	n
5	2	3	1	4
	i	a	m	a
	d	a	z	a

“And the *last* two go into column five like so:

t	h	i	a	n
5	2	3	1	4
h	i	a	m	a
n	d	a	z	a

“And now, we have our *completed* message decoded! If we had not filled in the *blank* blocks, and had run all our coded letters together like before, they would *not* have come out properly. If our message was the same, but we did not put in the ‘z’ and ‘a’ to finish filling in all the blocks in that row, our message would have been;

mi da aa hn

“*So?*” Sadie asks. “Those *are* all the letters of the actual message?”

“Okay. So Sadie, we *know* this is a *five* column grid, because of the *cipher* key length. We were also told that it is a *two* row grid. So, there should be *five* sets of *two* letters. Five sets because there are *five* columns. And each column should contain *two* letters. So, five columns by two rows should give us five times two, or *ten* total letters.

“But... when we look at our message, *without* having filled in the blank blocks in the last row, we only get *eight* letters. So, we know *something* is wrong. But, let’s see what the finished message *might* look like. Here, let me draw this one out too. The first two letters go into the column numbered one:

t	h	i	a	n
5	2	3	1	4
			m	
			i	

“The *next* two letters will go in the column with the number two:

t	h	i	a	n
5	2	3	1	4
	d		m	
	a		i	

“The next two go into the column numbered three, like this:

t	h	i	a	n
5	2	3	1	4
	d	a	m	
	a	a	i	

“The next two go in the column numbered four like so:

t	h	i	a	n
5	2	3	1	4
	d	a	m	h
	a	a	i	n

“*That’s* the finished message, since we’ve run out of *letters*.”

“But, it doesn’t make any *sense*,” Sadie laughs.

“*That’s* the whole *point* Sadie. That’s why it’s so *important* to fill in *any* blanks in the last row of your message. If you *forget*... the decoded message will *never* make any sense.

“So, before *sending* a message, *always* look at your *key* length and *multiply* by the number of rows there are *supposed* to be. Then match that *result* with the length of the message. If they *match*, you’re good to go. If they *don’t*... you’re in trouble, and most likely *forgot* to fill in the last few blocks.”

“But, why not just fill in the blank blocks with *any* old letter? Why use the ‘zaybxcwdve’ and so on?” Tia asks looking at the message.

“Well, you *could* actually. But by using what is known as the Standard Wizard Ending, when you get to reading the finished message, it’s just *easier* to spot the beginning sequence of ‘zaybxc’ and so forth. *That* way, you *know* you have reached the end of the *actual* message.

“See, many wizards *and* witches that used the block cipher method, may have *five* or more rows *below* the actual message, just to make the message *appear* as though it would take *years* to break it... if *ever*, because it’s so long. So, when you see the ‘zaybxc’ type sequence, you don’t *have* to bother with anything *after* it when reading the message, even if its *dozens* of pages.”

They all chat for a while about how interesting this method of coding a message is, and everyone begins to understand just how the cipher is created and reconstructed.

“Well, I see now Thian,” Tianna says looking back at what they have found in the leather book, “why you think this *may* be a block cipher in the book. But, I don’t see any blocks of *numbers* with dashes between them. So, how do we know the number of *rows*? And what’s the *cipher* key?”

“I’m not sure of course,” Thian says stretching, “But since this looks *ancient*, and since in the ancient days of this type of cipher, only the *highest* Order of witch or *wizard* would have known it, I think they used a very *basic* form of the block cipher. The cipher key may not be at the *beginning* though. It could be *any* word or *words* at some position within the writing that they had *agreed* on. Sometimes, they would use something like, say, the *first* and *fifth* words, or even *other* combinations.”

“Are you saying, even if this *is* a block cipher, it could be *any* word in the message? Or any *combination*?” Tianna snorts. “Well that’s just *great* Thian. So we’ve wasted *all* this time learning how a block cipher works, and after *all* that, it could be *any* combination of all those *words*! Terrific! How many *permutations* would that come to, say, using *all* the words, but as a *one* word cipher only?”

Tianna gets up and walks off *mumbling* something about Thian, which Amanda cannot quite catch. Thian turns a little red as he waves his wand, and something like a calculator appears.

“It’s not *my* fault they used a block cipher and have all those *words* you know.” Thian says quite irritated to no one in particular.

“Thian, how *do* you find the number of permutations anyway?” Amanda asks. “I’ve forgotten.”

“Oh, you take the total number of items, in our case *words*, and there are...” Thian counts the words in the message of the parchment. “*twenty* words. Next you multiply *that* number, with the next one *down*, which would be *nineteen*. Then you multiply *that* result with the *next* number down, which is *eighteen*. You keep multiplying the result, by the next lowest number, until there is nothing *else* to multiply. That gives you the *total* possible permutations for those items. So, let’s see how many *cipher* grids we’d need to try, if they *did* use a single word from the paragraph.”

The others get up and wander off to look around, and to stretch their legs, while Thian punches away at his little math device.

“Uh-oh,” Thian says shaking his head after a few moments.

Amanda, not standing far away, turns and asks, “What? How many *are* there?”

Tianna and the others walk back and notice that Thian looks a little pale.

“So? How many *grids* do we have to try if they used a *single* word in the message?” Tianna asks with a heavy sigh. “Like a *hundred* right?”

“Well, uh, actually a *lot* more than that,” Thian says swallowing hard.

“You mean... we need to do like a *thousand*!” Sadie says wide-eyed.

“No. Not a *thousand*...” Thian says with a shaky voice. “I can’t even *count* as high as we’d need to try. Here look, *this* is the number of possible permutations using *one* word at a time, from the whole thing.” Thian turns his calculating device around. Everyone leans in to look into the crystal, where the three-dimensional numbers are floating.

This is the number Thian arrived at: 2,432,902,008,176,640,000.

“Thian!” Tianna yells. “Are you *nuts*?! You must have *done* it wrong. *Give* me that and let me do it *right*!”

“Fine, *here*, but I’m *telling* you, that’s the *right* answer!”

As Tianna *snatches* the device from Thian, clears it and begins punching in the numbers, *hard*, as though trying to push the buttons right *through* the device, everyone looks at her nervously.

“What if Thian’s *right*?” Amanda asks nervously. “I mean, oh my *god*... that could take years and *years* to try all of them! Making a grid with the words in *one* combination, *numbering* the columns, putting the *letters* into all the blocks. Honestly, I don’t think we could *ever* break it!”

In a few more moments, Tianna says, “Oh *Stinkwarts*! I can’t *believe* it! I got the *same* thing. Sorry Thian. This isn’t good at *all*. There *has* to be a better way. This has to be some *different* kind of code or something.”

They all begin a long and *heated* discussion on what they should do, and are trying to come up with various ways to break the long line of code apart.

Thian gets up and walks off to think by himself. After an hour, Tianna stands and *throws* her latest paper into a pile next to her, saying angrily, “This is *impossible*! We’ll never *break* this *stupid* code, and we *can’t* go back - unless we *blast* our way back through the sealed cavern wall into *Bellinora’s* place!”

“But we don’t know who may still be *in* there though,” Tia says looking at Thian who is walking back to them.

“Well, it’s better than staying *here* and *starving* to death!” Tianna shoots back. Then looking at Thian snaps, “*What*?!”

“I’ve been thinking...”

“Oh *great*! *This* should be good!” Tianna snorts.

“Listen!” Thian says, his face reddening. “If *you* can come up with something, *great*. If *not*, I’ve had *enough* of your *mouth*! So either *put* up... or *shut* up!”

Everyone is *stunned* that Thian would say something like that, as Tianna instantly goes stiff with her eyes wide - not with *anger*, but with a look of *genuine* surprise.

“Now *listen* up and *don’t* give me any *lip*!” Thian continues. “As I *said*, I *think* this is a block cipher, *mainly* because that’s what the ancient *witches* and *wizards* used. I think they, like *Loki* and me, and most everyone *else* I’ve ever heard of that creates fairly *simple* ciphers, would only use from *one* to four words - not an entire *sentence*.”

Tianna starts to speak but Thian cuts her off saying, “*Quiet*! I’m not *finished*.”

“Also, like I said, only the *greatest* witch or *wizard* would know how to *do* these ciphers and other codes, back in the *ancient* times. So, there would be no *need* to create a really complex key. I say we *try* a couple words and see what we get.”

“But which *ones*?” Tia asks looking confused.

“Choose *well*,” Amanda says softly.

“Well of *course* we’d *like* to choose well,” Tianna says now sitting with the others. “But which *ones* do we choose?”

“No. I mean, let’s use the *words* ‘choose well,’” Amanda says picking up her paper. “Those are the *first* words on the parchment, and even though they aren’t in *quotes* or italics or anything, we’ve seen those *same* words before.”

“Where?” Tia asks looking to her paper.

“We read those same words around that *medallion* in the cavern with the pentagram... *remember?* We read around the outside first, then the *inner* part. All it said was, ‘choose well.’”

“But, didn’t that just mean to choose the right *petal* and door to go through?” Tianna asks.

“Maybe. I’m just *saying*, to me, I think it’s a little *too* much of a coincidence, that we find ‘choose well’ as the *only* thing on a medallion, and now, those are the *first* two words on this parchment.”

“Okaaaay, so let’s say you’re *right*,” Tianna says thoughtfully. “We *still* need the number of rows.”

“I *think* we already have it,” Sadie says pointing to her paper. “*Nine*. I think there are *nine* rows. The only reference to a *number* in the whole message is where it says, ‘Only *nine* will pass while the others perish.’”

“You know... I think she’s right!” Tia says with a laugh. “We don’t have anything to *lose*. And *Amanda* is right too you know. It *is* the second time we’ve come across ‘choose well.’ So, let’s just *try* it and see.”

Thian waves his wand and a very *large* piece of paper appears. “I’ll do it. I’ve had more *practice*, so I can do it faster. But, well, maybe you *all* should do it too, in case I make a *mistake*.” Thian waves his wand again and four more blank papers appear, whereupon each takes one and begins creating the grid.

Once Thian has drawn the grid, he breaks the line of code into *ten* sets of *nine* letters. Each set would be placed *down* the properly numbered column. This is what his separated code line looks like:

atnednnoo ganeeegly asolicnoa rheapstduu lptatheny lahnoayyb relrchirr agsoaemsw  
nlippbaea estrsnifz

Thian cries, “Hey! I think we may have it *right*! I just *divided* the coded message into *ten* blocks of *nine* letters, and it came out *even*!”

Everyone is getting *excited* as they begin working on their own grids.

It takes several minutes, but then Thian *whoops*, jumps up and begins doing a little dance.

“You *got* it?!” Tianna asks wide-eyed.

“Yeah! Amanda was *right*, so was *Sadie*, about the number of rows. But I want all of you to finish too. By the *moons*, we got it!”

This is Thian’s finished block cipher grid, with the decoded message.

c	h	o	o	s	e	w	e	l	l
1	4	7	8	9	2	10	3	5	6
a	r	r	a	n	g	e	a	l	l
t	h	e	g	l	a	s	s	p	a
n	e	l	s	i	n	t	o	t	h
e	p	r	o	p	e	r	l	a	n
d	s	c	a	p	e	s	i	t	o
n	t	h	e	b	e	n	c	h	a
n	d	i	m	a	g	i	n	e	y
o	u	r	s	e	l	f	o	n	y
o	u	r	w	a	y	z	a	y	b

Tianna is the second to finish and says, “By the *Oak* and Ash... I can’t *believe* it! It actually *worked*. But... I’ve got to tell you, I have no idea what it *means*.”

Amanda finishes hers and compares it to Thian’s and Tianna’s. They all match. Tia and Sadie then finish at about the same time, and everyone confirms they have the same result.

“Wow, this is *really* cool!” Amanda says with a huge grin. “This message could be *thousands* of years old, at *least*! But I’m with Tianna. I *don’t* understand the message. It says, ‘**Arrange all the glass panels into the proper landscape. Sit on the bench and imagine yourself on your way.**’ On our way to... *where*?”

“And what *landscape* is it talking about?” Tia asks quite confused.

“I’m not sure,” Thian says walking toward the glass panels. “But now we know what the glass panels are *for*.”

“I think we need to pull them out, slide them into the slots on those boards, to make some kind of *landscape*. It must be like some kind of glass *puzzle*.... you know, like we have to put together the panels in some kind of *order*, to make... well a completed *picture* of some kind.

“Come on, let’s see what we can make with them. Maybe there will be a written *message* once it’s finished, and maybe it will show us what we’re supposed to *do* or... *imagine*. Although, I have no idea what.”

## The Dark Forest

[To TOC](#)

It takes *hours* using their wands to move the heavy glass panels *into* and out of the slots. It does not take long before they are getting *very* frustrated with one another, as tempers *flare*. Eventually though, they finish what turns out to look something like a very *beautiful* three dimensional forest landscape.

Everyone is *exhausted*, and sits on the bench to rest and look at the finished landscape.

It pictures an *early* evening scene with some orange, yellow and *pink* clouds, birds in flight, many *tall* pine trees, rocks, *boulders*, grass, and a *stream* that is just a little way in the distance. There are wild flowers of many colors, with a dirt *path* leading from somewhere near the stream at the back wall, through the wild flowers, and up to their first glass panel. Everything is in near *perfect* perspective when properly seated on the bench.

"This is really *amazing* isn't it?" Amanda says with a weary smile. "With the glass panels each having only *parts* of the image painted on them, and each row of panels separated by only *six* inches, the *three* dimensional effect of the scene it creates is really *breathtaking*."

"Yeah it is," Tia says pointing to one of the panels, "with *some* of the scene clear, some colored but transparent, some *semi*-opaque, and others opaque, and sitting and looking through all *twenty-five* rows... it almost looks... *real*. Like you can just *walk* right into a forest or something."

As the kids sit on the long bench, tired but in awe of the amazingly intricate detail and *realism* the effect makes, they talk about what they need to do next.

"The message says to *picture* ourselves on our way... but *how*, and to *where*?" Amanda asks looking at the others.

"Well, I'm not *sure* of course," Thian says smiling at the wonderful colors in the clouds. "But, it seems to *me*, that Bellinora had taken up residence in that *cave* of hers, for something *other* than just selling her Wizitch *wonders* from."

"What do you mean?" Tianna asks.

"Well *think* about it. She just *happens* to be residing in a cave, with a *hidden* Wizitched doorway in *solid* rock, which just *happens* to lead *here*? And since we were *told* that we needed to be in the Dark Forest *before* the Specteroscope would work... *don't* you think that she has been hiding and *protecting* the entrance to the Dark Forest? After all, *that's* where the *Thirteen Shards of Legend* are said to be hidden. I think it's kind of *interesting* too, that Bellinora also, just *happens* to own not *only* a Specteroscope, but that *map* she gave us, that will narrow our search in each of the locations the scope will take us.

"I bet *she's* done some searching for those shards *too*. Anyway, *I* think we're supposed to imagine ourselves on our way *into* the Dark Forest. After all, these panels now *look* like a dark forest... kind of a *hint* to me. Any of you have a *better* explanation?"

Everyone shakes their heads, as they look intently at the forest scene before them.

"Amanda," Tia asks. "What did you do with the map anyway? You do *have* it don't you?"

"Oh yeah, the *Specteroscope* is in my pocket along with the map. I don't want to lose *them* for sure."

After a few minutes of staring at the scene, and wondering what they are supposed to be doing, the image slowly appears to *move*. The clouds slowly begin to change shape and color. The needles on many of the pines seem to be moving *gently* in some breeze, as the wild flowers appear to begin *swaying* as well.

“Uh, *guys*? Do any of you see the painting... well, *moving*?” Tia asks in a whisper. “And I *swear*, I can faintly hear the sound of *water* running over pebbles.”

“You know...” Amanda says with a sniff, “I think I can smell *pine* and the scent of *wild* flowers too!”

Soon, they hear the *distinct* sound of water rushing over the rocks in the nearby stream. They hear birds *chirping*, smell the *flowers* and pine clearly now, and begin to feel a fresh clean *breeze* brushing their faces.

The scene now looks *so* real, they *swear* they could walk right *into* the glass panel forest. They sit and watch, expecting something *else* to happen that will show them what they should do next, when a small *furry* rabbit-like creature, *hops* into the scene, from the edge of a glass panel, near the edge of *all* the panels, startling them.

The little creature takes a look at them, wiggles its ears and *cute* little nose, then hops across the image, from panel to panel, then hops down the *pathway* toward the stream. It then turns and *disappears* into the wild flowers out of the frame of their glass panels.

Sadie, *giggling*, jumps quickly up off the bench, and to everyone’s surprise, runs *right* at the glass panels.

“Sadie!” Tianna screams as Sadie is about to collide with the first panel, *everyone* on their feet now. They all *freeze* with eyes wide, as their jaws *drop*. Sadie has not only run right *into* the glass... but *through* it, and is now running down the dirt *pathway*, swirls of dust *rising* from her small boots as she runs. Sadie turns and runs through the wild flowers, *laughing* and chasing the furry little creature, which would hop just *high* enough to see it’s ears stick up out of the flowers.

The stunned kids look at one another for a brief moment, then go *running* after Sadie. They find that they somehow, can run right into and *through* the glass panels, which instantly turn into a *real* forest. They all stop to find that they are now, *truly* standing on a *dirt* pathway leading off into a *wonderful*, lush green forest.

Turning around, they see that they are looking through what *appears* to be a *huge* glass window, looking from the *forest*, through the *solid* side of a mountain, into a long *dimly* lit tiled room.

“*Awesome!*” Thian says with a grin.

They hear Sadie, and when they look around, spot her running through the wild flowers, *now* chasing what looks like a kind of four-winged *butterfly*. Everyone laughs as they *breathe* in the wonderfully fragrant clean air, watching Sadie try to *catch* the bright blue butterfly.

“Listen, why don’t we go back, get our *brooms* and packs, then have a quick look around,” Tianna says still laughing at Sadie, who is *jumping* and running after a group of fluttering orange butterflies. “Then we can either spend the *night* back inside, or set up the *cabin* out here, and get an early start in the morning. It looks like it’s getting *darker* here... wherever *here* really is.”

“What do you mean, wherever *here* really is?” Tia asks.

“Look *up*,” Tianna says pointing to the sky.

As Amanda, Thian and Tia look high above them, it takes them just a *moment* before they gasp at the same time.

“That’s... that’s *real* sky!” Amanda says quite startled. “I mean, we’re not *inside* any mountain at *all* now. How? *Where*? What happened?”

“Don’t know,” Tianna says looking around.

“Well *wherever* we are,” Thian says shaking his head, “we’re not in *Witch* Mountain anymore. *That’s* for sure. I think when we passed through the panels, we actually *translocated* to someplace else. I think we really *are* in the Dark Forest now.”

“Come on, let’s get our brooms and packs, and take a *quick* look around. Then, I’m with Tianna. I don’t think we ought to go off *wandering* around in some *unknown* forest in the dark - not when we don’t *have* to.

“Who knows *where* we really are, or what kinds of *animals* might be out at night. In fact, I was going to leave our travelers packs inside, but, I’m not sure how *long* that, uh, *window* might stay open, so let’s grab *everything*, just in case.”

Tianna says she will stay outside and keep an eye on Sadie, while the others go in and get all the brooms and packs.

When Amanda and the others return with their brooms and packs, and those of Tianna and Sadie, they slip into their packs, mount up and fly off for a quick look around.

They fly along the path for a short ways, smiling at the beautiful trees and flowers. Turning to the right, they make their way to the babbling brook, dismount and dangle their feet in the gurgling cool water. The sound of the water *dancing* over the rocks is almost hypnotic, and they feel themselves getting *sleepy* after a very long day and even *longer* evening.

They decide to head back and call it a night. Thian decides he wants to put up the cabin in the clearing they found near the stream, and have a *campfire* while they eat. They could all take nice *hot* baths and sleep in nice soft beds, instead of on the hard tile *floor*, back in the long rectangular room. Besides, Thian had suggested that the glass panels *may* be on a timer, and reset. If they did, and they *were* inside, they may have to start everything all *over* again.

Thian then said that in the morning, they would pack things up and figure out what to do and where to go. They all think it is a *great* idea, and look forward to singing and telling *stories* around the fire, and then, more than *anything*, getting *clean* and sleeping in a nice soft bed.

They all laugh and begin talking about how *lucky* it was that Thian and Loki like *codes* and ciphers, and that this turned out to be one he *knew*, otherwise, they would *never* have gotten out of there.

“It’s *odd* you know,” Thian says shaking his head. “Bellinora didn’t say *anything* at all about the room with the *pentagram* puzzle. And we could have been killed *easily* too, if it weren’t for Sadie a *few* times. And you doing your *Wielder* thing with the Bogey. And now the *cipher* with the glass panels. I’m not sure there really *would* have been that many people that could have figured it out you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Tianna says shaking her head. “We *were* really lucky. I wonder if Bellinora would have come to *help* us at some point, after she was *safe*, not knowing if we *would* have been able to know how to get through the room with the pentagram, with all the *petals* and *dangers* behind the doors. Then, if we did somehow *survive* that, if we would have solved the *cipher* to get into the forest. I mean *really*... what would the *chances* be that *anyone* would have survived *all* those things?”

At that moment, they arrive back to where the pathway curves to meet the side of the huge mountain, where they can look back into the mountain through the glass panels. As they round the corner and the base of the mountain, and the glass panels come *fully* into view, they laugh at how it looks like one *huge*, solid glass window is set right into the side of the mountain, showing a bright *tiled* rectangular room.

They lower to the ground and dismount, laughing at how incredible the glass panels to *reality* puzzle is.

“You know,” Thian says looking around, “this looks like a really *great* spot to set up the cabin. Let’s drop our brooms here, get our travelers packs off, *set* up the cabin, get *clean*, have something to eat, then *get* to bed. We can get an *early* start in the morning. What da ya say?”

They all agree and drop their brooms near the path where it curves toward the water. Before they drop their packs, they see a *flicker* of light in the room within the mountain.

"What was *that*?" Tia asks coming to a halt. "What was that red *flash*?"

"There's a *yellow* one. What's going on?" Sadie asks squinting into the room.

"Don't know," Thian says thoughtfully. "Hey! Maybe it's *Bellinora*! Maybe she's come to *help* us after all." Thian begins walking quickly toward the panels with a huge grin.

Just then, there are several *more* flashes of various colors. Several *men* back into view, firing *bolt* after *bolt* at something out of frame.

"They're *shooting* at *Bellinora*!" Amanda shouts pulling her wand as the others do the same.

Just as they are about to rush *back* to the glass panels, several *giant*, hairy *legs* wave into view through the window, slowly followed by the rest of the huge orangish-brown *tarantula*-like spider.

Both Thian and Sadie let out a *terrified* scream as the others gasp and go rigid, eyes *popping* out of their heads.

Two of the *five* visible men, turn to look through the glass panels to where *Amanda* and the others are standing, obviously having heard Sadie's and Thian's screams.

"That's *Morpheus*!" Tianna yells angrily. "I'll *kill* him!" she begins firing at him, just as he sidesteps. Her bolt strikes *another* man who staggers forward, quickly *speared* by the huge curved *fangs* of another gigantic spider that has entered.

As Tianna begins to run toward the glass panels, Tia yells, "Tianna, *no*!" Tia grabs Tianna's left arm as Thian quickly grabs her other.

"Let me *go*!" Tianna yells struggling to free herself. But before she can, three *huge* spiders drive all the remaining men back, *almost* out of view at the left edge of the glass panels. One is a very bright *yellow*, another a deep *menacing* red, the last, *midnight* black. Three other large spiders heard Tianna yell, and turn to look *directly* at the kids.

"Oh *man*..." Thian says as he quickly looks over his shoulder saying, "There's no *way* we can get to our brooms before..."

The first spider *charges* through the glass panels and is a *horrifying* sight to behold. Its huge *hairy* body raised high on thick *spiked* legs, clears the window, as it waves its *forward* sets wildly in front of it. It hesitates for a moment, then *sprints* to the right, into the open forest.

The kids begin *firing* spells at it, which do not seem to have much effect. The spider gives a high pitched *scream* when hit, *hisses* at them as foam *bubbles* from its hideous mouth, its long *black* curved fangs *glinting* in the failing light of the evening, as it looks around one of the huge trees.

"Run!" Tianna yells as the next two spiders *charge* through the glass panels, followed closely by *seven* men, who are quickly chased through the panels by five *other* giant spiders, with *more* spiders charging into the room behind them.

Tia yells, "Hey! There're those two *men* we met on the road to the village. The ones *Anastasia* said *grabbed* *Cassandra*, and tried to get *her* too. That's *Jake* and *Yarro*!"

A *dozen* spiders sprint through the panels, *scatter* in all directions after the seven men, *Amanda* and her friends.

One of the spiders is *massive*, towering over the other giant spiders by more than *ten* feet. It is *horrifying*, yet stunningly colorful. From the tips of its legs, to about *half* way to the body, it is a *magnificent* royal blue. From there to the body, it is an almost *translucent* orange. The giant *flat* portion of its body, like some kind of *disk*, is a fiery *red-orange*. Its bulging abdomen is *red*, with *blue* stripes. Its head is *royal* blue, set with huge *piercing* black eyes in front, and a *row* of

eyes decreasing in size along both sides of the head. The fangs *glisten*, like curved, black glass *daggers*. The massive spider appears to survey the scene for a moment, then quickly runs *off* into the surrounding forest, away from the fight.

“*Get that girl!*” a very tall man yells to Morpheus and the others. “*She’s the one who has the necklace. I’ll hold these spiders off long enough for you to get her, but make it quick!*”

Morpheus turns catching sight of Amanda, who is looking *directly* at him. She watches as a sneer spreads across his face. He raises his wand to *fire* a spell at her before she can raise her own. Before he can fire however, he is *struck* on the side of the face with a *slashing* curse, quickly followed by another, spraying *blood* over his face and down across his chest. He staggers to the side in surprise, *whipping* his head around. He *locks* eyes with a very angry Tianna, who flips her wand to fire another shot at him.

Just as Tianna fires, a giant spider *charges* in between them, heading *straight* for Tianna. Tianna’s bolt strikes the spider in the mouth, making it *cry* out, then *hiss* loudly as it crouches, a massive forearm *touching* the spot where it had been struck.

Tianna fires off *three* slashing spells which strike the huge spider *square* in the right eye. It lets out a thin high pitched *cry*. Staggering back, it lifts one of its huge legs to the large eye, which is *missing*, the socket still *bubbling* and smoking. It turns, and with its thick, tall *hairy* legs moving like only a *tarantula* can, once again angrily *charges* toward a terrorized Tianna.

Tianna is *screaming* at it to go away, while trying to run backward, firing *slashing* spell after *slashing* spell at it. This is one of the *larger* spiders, and even though huge *gashes* are opened with each hit, it does little to *injure* it as its hide is thick, and *well* protected by the thick hairs. The spider begins *crying* in pain and *hissing* in anger, as it twists, *ducks*, jumps and *twitches*, while both dodging Tianna’s spells, and being repeatedly *struck* as well.

Amanda has managed to maneuver her way out from between *three* spiders, when she catches sight of Morpheus. He is in a *desperate* battle with two spiders that are driving him *back* toward the tree line.

The tall man who had yelled at Morpheus to *get* Amanda, is now rounding Morpheus and walking toward Amanda with his wand raised. He pays *no* attention to the *frantic* fighting around him, not even to Morpheus who repeatedly *yells* for help as his *killing* curses have little effect on the huge spiders. Amanda fires off *two* quick blasts of *pus* popping spells, followed quickly by one *vomit* spell. The man *laughs* as he waves his wand quickly, deflecting the bolts to the sides, where they strike the dirt, *violently* sending up fragments of rock into the surrounding air.

The man is grinning at Amanda, as she hears him say over all the screaming, *yelling*, crying, hissing and *running* all around them, “Is that *all* you can do child? *You?* The *Wielder of Power?* *Ridiculous!* You have *no* power greater than *mine!* I... *Taldan* of Olnar, will now *kill* you, and take the *necklace* for my own. *I will become, the true Wielder of Power!*”

Taldan raises his wand as Amanda feels a *jolt* shoot through her. Just as she snaps her wand up, a spider *races* up behind Taldan. One of the men *yells* and Taldan spins *just* in time to be knocked to the ground by the spider’s two forward legs. The spider *towers* over Taldan, who tries to roll to the side to grab his dropped wand. The Spider quickly *rises* high on its hairy legs, curling its abdomen under its body. Amanda stands *frozen* in place, watching Taldan grab his wand, but it is *too* late for him to react. The spider has *sprayed* Taldan with a *thick* mass of webbing.

Amanda continues to watch for a moment in *stunned* horror, as the spider uses its front legs to roll Taldan *over* and over in the spraying webbing. She can clearly see Taldan *struggling* in vain within the thick sticky webbing. The spider continues to spray *more* webbing, rolling

Taldan like a *spool* being wound with thread. She watches until she can *no* longer see Taldan at all, eventually, *all* movement within the webbing stops.

A scream *snaps* Amanda out of her stupor. Spinning quickly, Amanda sees Thian facing a much smaller *orange* spider a short distance in front of him, that is *about* to reach a shrieking Tianna.

Thian fires *three* quick bolts, striking the spider in the head, from the left side of where Tianna has just *tripped* and is sprawled flat on her back.

Each of Thian's slashing spells have struck the *same* spot on the side of the spider's head, cutting *deep* enough for his *fourth* bolt to enter the spider's brain, *killing* it instantly. The huge spider *drops* like a boulder to the ground, its huge *fangs* sticking in the dirt, *one* on either side of Tianna's *chest*, its ugly face *pinning* her to the ground.

Thick, *black* blood *oozes* from its hideous mouth, along with a greenish *bubbling* foam, dripping *thickly* over Tianna's face and chest. She struggles *desperately* to free herself, coughing, *choking* and gasping for air, all the while looking into the huge *gleaming* eyes of the dead spider.

Tia yells something and Amanda, who has just begun running to help her, spins just in time to see *two* spiders rip one of the men in *half*. It *looks* like the man who was called *Jake*. *Half* of the bloody and *dripping* man *dangles* from one spider's mouth, the *other* half from the other spider. Amanda turns and violently *throws* up.

Tia reaches Tianna, grabs hold of her arms and pulls, *straining* to drag her free of the spider pinning her to the ground.

Thian screams, "Tia! *Look* out!" just as a spider is coming at Tia from her right, where *another* man is firing *killing* curses at two other spiders, that are forcing him *back* toward the trees. Amanda is *stunned* that the killing curses have little effect, then realizes that the *spiders* must have some kind of protective *spells* on them. But *how*? And *who* would want to protect them?

Tia *yells* in terror letting go of Tianna, then begins firing *spells* at the giant spider. Each time a bolt strikes the spider, it *hisses* and quickly darts from side to side, trying to avoid the brilliant bolts of the spells.

Amanda is firing spells which at first, *binds* the legs of some of the huge spiders with *thick* rope, causing them to tumble to the ground as they struggle to get free.

Turning, Amanda sees Sadie running *frantically* into the trees to the right, with three giant spiders chasing her. In a moment, Sadie disappears into the dark *shadows* of the trees, as have the spiders.

Thian is fighting *three* huge spiders which have formed a circle around him. Thian's eyes are so *huge*, they're almost all Amanda sees of his *terrified* face, as the spiders quickly begin to circle around him.

Thian spins and fires *bolt* after bolt as quickly as he can move. His strikes do *nothing* but further *anger* the beasts, but at least seem to keep them from *charging*... for the moment anyway... at least until he tires, and can no longer fire *quickly* enough to hold them off.

Amanda has become *frozen*, trying to figure out *which* spiders to shoot at, looking from the spot where *Sadie* has vanished into the dark trees, to Tia and Tianna, to Thian. Then to *Morpheus* and the remaining men, two of whom are fighting three spiders each, while several *other* spiders are running around looking for any *other* prey, or any dropped *bits* they have not eaten yet.

About to fire at the two spiders repeatedly *lunging* and retreating at Thian, Amanda feels a *jolt* shoot through her. She begins to hear voices *yelling* in her head, telling her things she should *do*. Her arm seems to rise on its own, even as she *struggles* against it. She begins firing spells

that *completely* sever a leg or two of the spiders that are about to *tear* her apart, then spells that instantly *paralyze* the spiders, freezing them in place, as they begin to *bubble* and dissolve.

Thian and the others are doing *everything* they can to stop the spiders, but *more* have come out of the glass panels. The spiders seem to be *everywhere*.

Amanda turns to see *Morpheus* fire three quick bolts at a huge spider, which drops to the ground... *dead*. Morpheus turns, panting hard, and catches Amanda's eyes for a moment. He then snaps his head around to look at the *cocoon* which encases his master, *Taldan*. It is though Morpheus is trying to decide whether to go after *Amanda*, or free his *master*. Two charging spiders decide things *for* him, and he begins stumbling backward as they charge, rearing up on their *hind* legs, their massive fangs *dripping* venom.

The voices in Amanda's head are getting *louder* and louder, yelling various *killing* curses she should use.

Amanda shouts, "No! I don't want to have to *kill* them... get *out* of my head! I don't *want* to kill them, I just want them to *go* away." She then turns to fight another spider.

She fires a few bolts into its eyes, sending the spider *scampering* away from her.

As Amanda runs from another spider, a brilliant *flash* catches her attention, and she looks back through the glass panels. There she sees a man dressed *all* in black, firing *spell* after spell at *three* giant spiders which are forcing him back, *further* into the tiled room.

He turns for a brief moment, looking through the panels, *directly* at Amanda.

"Oh my *god*! It's *Wind Rider*!" she gasps.

Firing off several more bolts of her own, she runs to the side, away from a *charging* spider. She shoots a look back through the glass panels as she runs. Wind Rider is firing bolts *quick* as a cat. Two of the huge spiders have dropped to the floor, the other now *trying* to get over them, to *attack* him.

As Wind Rider turns and begins to *sprint* into the panels, one of the men near the edge of the forest, fires *back* through the panels, *misses* Wind Rider, but strikes the *huge* spider that has just managed to force its *dead* brothers to the side. The man's shot strikes the *side* of the spider, dropping it to the floor on that injured side, sending it *skidding* and spinning into the *side* of the glass panels at an angle, *shattering* the panels on impact.

Amanda's eyes fly *wide* as she sees Wind Rider's *terrified* expression, as he is only *half* way through the panels, reaching out, as if *reaching* for Amanda, when the panels *explode* into millions of shattered shards of *deadly* flying glass.

Amanda gasps as she sees the panels *vanish*. She is *horrified* to be looking at a *solid* mountain.

"*Wind Rider! No!*" she then quickly realizes, "The *panels*! The spider *destroyed* the panels. They're gone! We *can't* get back inside to *help* him!"

Amanda, fear coursing through her, feels another *jolt* shoot through her, much *stronger* than the other, as she feels her hair begin to rise off her back. The voices in her head have returned, *yelling* at her, as she continues to *fight* against their influence and *control* over her once again.

She binds another spider's *legs* in time to turn and see Sadie, *scrambling* up a tree back near the tree line, frantically trying to get away from the spiders that are *chasing* her. She is up a good ways, but a large spider stands on its *hind* legs and takes a *swipe* at her with its forelegs. Sadie is *flicked* from the tree as though she were a *bug* being flicked off a shoulder. She *flies* into the clearing from the dark shadows of the forest, having been thrown *high* into the air for twenty feet, where she crashes *hard* onto her back and does not move.

Amanda's hair shoots *straight* up as she watches the huge spider near Sadie rise up on several of its back legs, its other legs waving *menacingly* in the air, its long *curved* shining fangs beginning to form drops of *deadly* venom.

Amanda hears a young man's voice *scream* in her head. Amanda's arm *whips* up and she begins *blasting* away at the spider about to pounce on Sadie's still form. The spider *explodes*! *Hundreds* of bits of spider bits fly everywhere, coating *everyone* with thick *sticky* black blood.

"There're too *many* of them!" Tia shouts helping Tianna scramble to her feet, after she had been knocked down by another spider, before Amanda blasted *that* one to bits as well.

Tianna fires off a couple bolts scaring away another spider about to get Sadie, who is now sitting up and holding the back of her head.

Looking around quickly, Amanda sees that only *Morpheus* and two other men are left. There are several *arms* and legs from some of the other men *scattered* about, and *some* encased in a cocoon, like Taldan. Morpheus and the two others are fighting *seven* angry spiders, and not doing a very good *job* of it. Morpheus had seen Amanda *completely* destroy one of the huge spiders, and Amanda had caught the look on his *startled* face.

*Eleven* huge spiders form a large circle around all the kids.

"I said... *no*!" Amanda yells and her hair falls *instantly* to her shoulders. She is panting hard and looks *completely* exhausted.

Morpheus fires a *quick* shot at Amanda, just as Amanda's hair had fallen. His bolt *grazes* her arm, cutting a large *slash* in it. Amanda staggers back and bends forward, grabbing her arm as blood *rushes* through her fingers.

Morpheus screams, "I *got* her! She *can* be killed... *get* her!"

He had no sooner yelled, then several spiders charged *him* and the other men.

"The *Spectroscope*! Amanda, use the *Spectroscope* to get us the heck *out* of here!" Tianna yells as she and Sadie walk backward toward the center of the circle of spiders, each blasting the *worst* spells they know as they retreat.

"Yeah, *right*, okay," Amanda says quickly reaching into her pants pocket, drawing out the device on its long chain. She quickly pulls it from the pouch which dangles on the longer chain, flips the *cover* open, spins a dial several times, and yells. "Everybody! You have to touch *me* or the *Scope*. *Hurry*, they're closing in!"

The spiders tighten their circle, sensing that *something* is about to happen, each *lunging* then retreating when struck. But as soon as Thian, Tianna, Sadie and Tia run for Amanda, *several* of the spiders charge as well.

Tianna, Sadie and Tia all reach Amanda quickly. Thian is further away but is *almost* to them, when the *largest* spider that *towers* over all the others, comes *charging* back in from the forest, and into the clearing from the tree line.

Amanda cannot believe how *gigantic* it is or how fast it is running. Its huge *forelegs* waving in the air in front of it, sends *mind* numbing *terror* into them all. It reaches Thian, knocking him forward onto the ground and *skidding* away from it.

Tianna, Sadie and Tia fire at the gigantic spider's face, with *intense* hatred, while Amanda spins to fire at several of the others.

Sadie yells, "Our *brooms*!"

Amanda's hair *snaps* up as she spins around, her wand *whirls* and without a word, *all* the brooms fly to them as Tianna, Sadie and Tia catch them. Tia holds onto hers and Amanda's, while Tianna holds onto her own and Thian's.

They continue to fire at the *hissing* spiders all around them, and force the *massive* one back from Thian, keeping it from killing him, as Thian frantically *crawls* forward toward his friends. The bolts from their wands light up the now *darkened* clearing, as though they are standing in a circle of *strobe* lights. All the movements around them look as though they are in a *stop* motion film.

Thian crawls enough to grab onto Amanda's ankle as the giant spider *towers* over them all. Its dark black eyes *glisten* in the flashing light, as half a *dozen* other spiders stand nearby, as though the giant one told them to *back* off, wanting the kids for itself.

Everyone is either holding *onto* Amanda, or someone who *is* holding onto her as they all continue to fire at the *gigantic* spider right beside them, which is still trying *desperately* to get Thian. Everything is happening in *split* seconds. The spider is hit *again* and again, and begins to stagger back, as Amanda screams, "I said... get *out* of me!"

Amanda's hair *falls* to her back as she cries, "Hold on! *Here* we go!"

Amanda looks back in time to see *Morpheus* turn away from fighting the spiders and looks *right* into her eyes. He looks at the device in her hands with confusion for a moment, then, eyes widening screams, "*Nooooo!*" just as he is sprayed with a *stream* of thick webbing, knocking him to the ground, his wand *rolling* away from him. In sheer *terror*, he desperately grabs for his wand but in vain.

As Amanda presses the button on the Spectroscope, the *towering* spider near Thian *lunges*, stretching out a long hairy leg, *pinning* him to the ground.

There is a brilliant *blue-white* flash as all the kids *vanish*. The remaining *startled* spiders scurry around in circles, *looking* for their prey, but there are *none* to be found.

*All* have vanished but for the struggling Taldan, *Morpheus*, and one short man who is being *shredded* by three large hungry spiders. All the other men have been *killed*... and either eaten, or still *being* eaten... many while *still* alive.

What the remaining spiders *do* notice however, almost *immediately*, is that the largest, *fiercest*, and by far the *meanest* of their brethren... their *massive* leader...

*is also missing.*

~~~~~

On another realm, in the *highest* tower of a massive black castle, within a large laboratory *filled* with bubbling beakers and *steaming* cauldrons, a *chiming* suddenly sounds, coming from an adjoining closet, then stops. The face of the woman seated at her desk, *snaps* her head around in surprise, looking *blankly* at the closed closet door. For a moment, she sits staring at the *tall* black arched wooden door, as though not sure she had *heard* it.

The chiming *sounds* again startling her. Springing to her feet, she sends her chair *skidding* across the floor as she bolts for the door. Yanking the door open, she makes her way *quickly* inside the cramped and almost *filled* space of the closet. Illuminating her wand, she *frantically* begins moving heaps of piled bags and *boxes* out of her way. The chime comes again *just* as she grasps her hand around an old *dusty* wooden box. Hands trembling, she slides the box from the shelf.

For a moment, she stares at the ancient, *faded* golden dragon carved on the lid, with the *odd* symbol above its head. The contents *chime* again, almost causing her to *drop* the box.

Snapping the lid open, she stares wide-eyed in shock, *disbelief* clearly etched on her face, as her jaw drops at the *glowing* face of her ancient Spectroscope. Someone, has just used *another* Spectroscope. But not just *any* scope. There are only *two* of these very *special*, and most ancient Scopes said to *possibly* still be in existence. She has always suspected *who* may have the sister Scope to this one, but did not *really* think it was still in existence. She had reprogrammed *this* Scope herself, *ages* ago, to alert her should a Scope of *equal* power ever be used. She had tried *asking* this Scope, if indeed the other Scope did exist, but it would give her no answer.

The Spectroscope chimes, once again startling her.  
Taking the Scope from the ancient *velvet* lined box,  
she pushes a dial button to silence it.  
With a trembling hand, she *clutches* it to her chest,  
her heart beating *wildly* as she closes her eyes.  
Taking short *gasping* breaths,  
an icy chill *crawls* its way up Morana's spine.

###

End of Book Two  
Please continue with Book Three:

Amanda Ackers and  
The Thirteen Shards of Legend

Available sometime in 2013.



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## Appendix A

### [To Prologue](#)

# IMPORTANT

## PLEASE READ THIS FIRST!

### How To Read This Book

**Y**ou think that you have a fictional story in your hands... you're ready to read it like you've done with every other fictional book... but what you really have is not a fictional story, at all.

What you have is the actual transcript, as was taken directly from the memories of those on the adventures, and recorded using the standard Elvish transcription methods.

So... what does all that mean to you? It means that what you read will take on a completely different form than what you're used to.

If (supposedly) correct, earth-bound punctuation and sentence structure (that was - and may still be - crammed down your throat) is important to you... if there is no way you can wrap your mind around a different (better?) way of writing... if proper English is the end all and be all for you... if you aren't able to see that language structure from other cultures can be vastly different than what you've always been told is the proper version (plain vanilla) and by experiencing the language from those other cultures (worlds, realms... you get the idea) simply can't add substance, vision, imagination to your thinking ... if what you're about to read is everything you've been told by your English teachers, literary professors, writing scholars, is completely wrong and NOT the "correct" way to write, then, please, put this book down now and do not continue. (And, yes, you've just experienced a bit of what I'm talking about... did you realize that what you just read is ONE, very long sentence... different from what you would expect, but still good, eh?)

We take no responsibility for any headaches (pounding or otherwise), sputtering or swearing that may occur while reading this transcript.

We do take responsibility for opening your mind... removing those tight braces from your brains... and enveloping you in a world with its own glorious language and writing.

Still reading? Good. Your mind isn't as closed as some thought it was. So, here's what you'll find within the pages of this transcript: punctuation in this book WILL NOT be that to which you are accustomed. Commas, for instance, will not appear as they would in formal written literature, but rather where those in the story take a breath or pause while speaking.

It is important to remember, this is not a book or novel in the traditional sense.

Since the transcript has now been translated into 7,546,321 different languages, on more than 15,634,444 realms plus 3,264,785 sub dialects within the lesser realms, the High Elves felt they needed to keep the recorded format of punctuation in the High Elf standard, and not have to change it to meet the demands of all the various formatting and literary styles in all the realms and languages. For example, for this version, the words may be in English but the punctuation remains in the traditional Memory Recording Formatting.

Italics in Elvish are used to emphasize where the actual speaker emphasized a word or gave a word or words greater inflection, so that the reader can, as closely as possible, read the story and get the same feeling or emotions as when it was actually spoken.

Take note, you do not need to raise the volume when reading italics, merely the pitch. But in the earth realm, we do this all the time in our everyday speech. The only time you may wish to

raise the volume is if the present mood calls for it or if the italics are next to an exclamation point.

Italics in this English version on the earth realm, are also used for product names, movie titles, songs, proper names and places, and so forth, should they apply.

The official (and only authorized) authors of these adventures to be presented in any format within the earth realm, are Glenn and Sasha Gabriel, who are personal friends of Amanda Ackers, having met her when she lived on the earth realm, the relationship blossoming into a close friendship.

Glenn and Sasha have been overwhelmed with questions as to why there are so many uses of italics in the story, even though the explanation above seemed clear enough.

So, just in case the headache may be starting, let me reiterate. The reason, once again, is so you may read the story as closely to the original feelings and emotions of the speakers as possible. The italics are used where the speaker gave more inflection to emphasize a word or words.

You may ask, “Why is this so important?” Well, let’s take a look at a very simple example. The following is a simple sentence. How you may read that line of text, may or may not be how it was originally spoken, nor how someone else may read it. The emphasis / inflection of a single word or words has a powerful effect on the overall feeling or emotion of the line.

Take a look at the following sentence:

“This is the same alcove I left from on Earth.”

Now, read the following lines giving *some* inflection to the word or words in italics. There is no need to over emphasize them by speaking louder, unless there is an exclamation mark by it. When we speak, we generally give more inflection by simply *raising* our pitch slightly, even extending the spoken length of the word. For example, let’s look at the word, “same” below. You may raise your pitch slightly while drawing out the word, something like ‘saaaame’ and not necessarily increasing your volume.

I have bolded a different word in the sentence below, so you may better find the emphasis in these examples:

“**This** is the same alcove I left from on Earth.”

“This **is** the same alcove I left from on Earth.”

“This is **the** same alcove I left from on Earth.”

“This is the **same** alcove I left from on Earth.”

“This is the same **alcove** I left from on Earth.”

“This is the same alcove **I** left from on Earth.”

“This is the same alcove I **left** from on Earth.”

“This is the same alcove I left **from** on Earth.”

“This is the same alcove I left from **on** Earth.”

“This is the same alcove I left from on **Earth**.”

“**This** is the **same** alcove I left from on Earth.”

If you sounded each sentence out, you realized that each sentence *meaning* will be different. You should now be able to read the transcript in the manner that the *speaker* meant to say it, experiencing *their* feelings, attitudes and *emotions* at the time the words were spoken.

I know, I know. Seeing so many italics and adding some inflection at those points, may take some getting used to, but once you get the hang of it, it will become second nature.

An ellipse (...) is used wherever a *longer* pause was used or when a sentence is cut off due to an interruption.

Question marks are self-explanatory.

Semicolons *may* or may not be used, but *if* used, they may not appear or be used as you may expect (they amuse the High Elves).

Quotation marks are used to denote what a person or *creature* is saying as well as *thinking*. You will be warned if it was a *thought* for it will say something to that effect.

Other punctuation symbols may or may not be used as expected.

### **NOTE:**

If you are an English major or literary aficionado, please re-read the above several times, for I'm told that if you do not *fully* comprehend the above, the way this book is formatted will drive you *mad* (or perhaps madder than you already are).

If you are one who is a literary *critic* (you know who you are) and nit-picks proper word use and formatting as it pertains to the English language... someone who needs *proper* character and plot development and other such *nonsense*... you will truly be *disappointed* in the reading of this transcribed *true* story.

Therefore, please stop now and give this book to someone whose nose is not stuck so *highly* in the air, as to not allow them to enjoy *fabulous* adventures, written exactly as it happened in the adventurer's *very* own words!

This is *not* a novel which will conform to your idealistic English way of writing and formatting (does it really have to be?). Instead, it is an *exact* transcript of the adventures as they took place, using the *formatting* of the High Elves... so, please, get *over* it!